“THIS IS WHO I AM:”

A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Black Gay Men

With an Undergraduate Degree from a Historically Black College or University

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Obie Ford III

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ABSTRACT
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“This IS WHO I AM:” A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Black Gay Men With an Undergraduate Degree from a Historically Black College or University (365 pp.)

Director of Dissertation: Robert B. Young

This is a phenomenological study of the lived experiences of four gay Black men with an undergraduate degree from a historically Black college or university (HBCU). The goal of the study was to learn about the individual experiences of these men through self-reflections. Data for the study was collected primarily through an autobiographical sketch that each participant completed and individual interviews that were conducted with each participant. The autobiographical sketches and interviews were transcribed and studied for emerging themes.

Eight major themes emerged from this research, which included: deciding to attend an HBCU; coming out at an HBCU; witnessing harassment and homophobia during the college years; being a Black gay male in the Black community; being Black and gay in mainstream society; coping strategies; the significance of attending an HBCU; and summing up the HBCU experience. Each major theme had a series of sub-themes.

Disclosing their sexual orientation subjected the research participants to witnessing harassment and homophobia during their college years. All of the participants either witnessed harassment of fraternity members, friends, college authorities, and family members.
In the general Black community, the participants identified a number of issues they faced as Black gay men. “Black masculinity” was a phrase that most of the participants used when describing the expectation of Black men in the general Black community. The participants felt that mainstream White society was generally more accepting of homosexuality than the Black community. However, the participants also felt that they were victims of racism in mainstream White communities, both heterosexual and homosexual.

The significance of attending an HBCU centered around finding support. All of the research participants identified their friendship circles as their main support system. Each participant also identified his religious and/or spiritual connection as being a support system.

Life after an HBCU included each participant feeling that his HBCU indoctrinated him with: desire to give back to the community, passion to seek further education and gainful employment, and pride in being part of the HBCU tradition.

Approval: _______________________________________________________________

Robert B. Young
Professor of Counseling and Higher Education
I dedicate this page to both my father, Obie Ford, Jr.,

and my grandfather, Obie Ford, Sr.

For all that I have accomplished,

I feel your collective smiles upon me.

I am honored to embody your name.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Study</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of the Study</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale for Qualitative Studies</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues of Membership in the Black Community</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Perspectives and Models of Identity Development</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay Students in College</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale for Design</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Witnessing Harassment and Homophobia ...........................................235
Being a Black Gay Male in the Black Community ...............................246
Being Black and Gay in Mainstream Society .....................................259
Coping Strategies ..............................................................................263
Significance of Attending an HBCU ....................................................271
Summing up the HBCU Experience ....................................................286
Summary .............................................................................................290

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ..................292
Introduction ........................................................................................292
Purpose ...............................................................................................292
Methodology ......................................................................................292
Thematic Analysis of the Data ..............................................................293
Relating the Themes to the Research Questions .................................296
Generated Hypotheses ........................................................................313
Recommendations for Future Study ...................................................314
Recommendations for Practice ............................................................316
The Researcher’s Experiences and Perceptions ...................................319
Summary .............................................................................................323

REFERENCES ...................................................................................327

APPENDIX A: Biographical Sketch Questionnaire ...............................347
APPENDIX B: Autobiographical Reflections Related to Each Participant ...349
APPENDIX C: Interview Guide ..............................................................360
APPENDIX D: Human Subject Consent Form
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Themes and Sub-Themes of Black Gay Men who Attended an HBCU........294
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Black gay men with an undergraduate degree from a historically Black college or university (HBCU). Phenomenological methodology is utilized to illuminate the reflections and experiences of these men. This study also seeks to explore how attending an HBCU has impacted the multiple identities of these men, including their sexual orientation, racial/ethnic, and general identity development.

Background of the Study

In the American higher education system, a college degree has long been seen as the great equalizer across colors and creeds. For Black people, HBCUs reflect their struggle to gain equality, group recognition in America, and access to higher education (Sissoko & Shiau, 2005). The creation of HBCUs provided educational opportunities for Blacks in the South after their emancipation (Redd, 1998). Predominantly White institutions (PWIs) have a legacy of excluding Blacks, and “HBCUs were specifically created to redress this exclusion” (Bennett & Xie, 2003). The rich history of HBCUs includes producing both the first significant numbers of Black professionals in the U.S., as well as individuals who would become great leaders in the struggle for racial equality (Bennett & Xie, 2003).

Today, campus climates of HBCUs continue to be unique and distinctive from other institutions of higher learning, including PWIs. HBCUs are designed to nurture and
affirm Black students on a number of levels which include: building welcoming communities as oppose to communities of marginalization; emphasizing Black history and culture in its curricula; involvement and integration into campus life and student activities; and closer relationships with faculty and staff (Redd, 1998; Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Tatum, 2004).

The existing literature on HBCUs and students who attend HBCUs is wide-ranging. There is a body of literature that focuses on the role, history, mission, and struggles of HBCUs (Bennet & Xie, 2003; LeBlanc, 2001; Redd, 1998; Tatum, 2004). There is a large portion of research that compares the experiences of Black students who attend HBCUs with those who attend PWIs (Allen, 1992; Ayers, 1983; Bohr, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995; Kim, 2002; Thomas, 1981; Watson & Kuh, 1996; Willie, 2003).

There is also a body of literature that explores the lived experiences of White students as minorities on the campuses of HBCUs (Hall & Closson, 2005; Hazzard, 1988). Other researchers have examined the social adjustment, ethnic identity, and academic success of Black students at HBCUs (Bohr, Pascarella, & Terenzini, 1995; Constantine, 1994; Fleming, 1984, 2001; Kim, 2002; LeBlanc, 2001).

There is no body of scholarly research however that addresses the above areas of concern in relation to Black students who also identify as homosexual, particularly, Black gay men. Even though HBCUs may be welcoming environments for the masses of African Americans who choose to attend, for individuals who also openly identify as
homosexual, these environments may present similar struggles that mirror those that have challenged the African American race for centuries in White America.

Most of the literature about the experiences of gay students and Black students has been conducted at PWIs. Many gay students at PWIs encounter heterosexism and homophobia; and many Black students experience racism and prejudice while at PWIs (D’Augelli, 1989; 1991; Evans & Wall, 1991; Nettles, 1998; Rhoads, 1994; 1995; Savin-Williams, 1990). Many of these students possess the ability to achieve success in the face of adversity, but others succumb to the verbal and physical abuse, discrimination, and emotional duress that can be caused by faculty, friends, institutional policies, parents, other students, staff members, and society at large (D’Augelli, 1989; McKinney, 2004; Nettles, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1994, Sauve, 1997).

It is important to note, however, that only a few authors have addressed the issues and experiences of college-aged Black gay men, even in predominantly White environments (Brooks, 1981; Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002; Loiacano, 1989; Sears, 1995; Wall & Washington, 1991). Evans and Wall (1991) suggested that PWIs are environments in which negative attitudes and discrimination against Black gay men and lesbians permeate classrooms, residence halls, offices, student groups, and institutional policies. While one may presuppose that Black gay men experience similar obstacles of discrimination at HBCUs, no researcher has explored the experiences of this population at such institutions of higher learning. There is a gaping hole in the literature about the lived experiences of Black gay men who choose to attend HBCUs.
The professional literature surrounding homosexual identity development has emerged from White, Euro-American perspectives (Greene, 1994; Rothblum, 1994). The literature has virtually ignored racial and ethnic differences. A few authors have addressed the issues confronting racial and ethnic gay men (Chan, 1992; Espin, 1987; Greene, 1994). The literature surrounding racial identity, sexual identity and sexual orientation of Black gay male college students is even more limited in higher education literature (Loiacano, 1989; Sears, 1991; Wall & Washington, 1991).

Black people experience proportionally more negative life events as a result of racism than their White counterparts in society, and gay people experience more negative life events as a result of living in a heterosexist society (Brooks, 1981). It is conceivable that Black gay men face even greater challenges because they have to deal with the challenges of multiple minority identities (Poynter & Washington, 2005). As Black men, they experience racism and stigmatization by society at large; as gay men, they experience heterosexism and homophobia in many communities and as Black gay men, they face challenges within both Black and White communities.

In a quantitative study that examined Black-White differences in attitudes toward homosexuality, Lewis (2003) found that while homophobia persists in both Black and White communities, Blacks disapprove of homosexuality more strongly than Whites. Black men who are attracted to the same sex face greater disapproval from their families and heterosexual friends than do Whites (Lewis, 2003; Battle & Lemelle, 2002). This disapproval not only affects the self-esteem of Black gay men, but it also poses many barriers for youthful gay Black males in terms of self-acceptance. This becomes more
evident as Black youths are just as likely as their elders to condemn homosexuality (Lewis, 2003).

Coretta Scott King declared, “Homophobia is still a great problem throughout America, but in the African-American community it is even more threatening. This is an enormous obstacle for everyone…we have to launch a national campaign against homophobia in the Black community” (as cited in Wockner, 2001). In order to launch this campaign, “understanding of the roots of black attitudes toward homosexuality” (Lewis, 2003, p. 75) is required.

Statement of the Problem

There is not a body of scholarly research that focuses on the lived experiences of Black gay men who attend HBCUs. This study focuses on the lived experiences of Black gay men with an undergraduate degree from an HBCU. I seek to explore what it is like to be a student who is male, Black, and homosexual while attending and eventually graduating from an HBCU. Therefore, I have formulated the following research questions for exploration:

1. What are the lived experiences of Black gay men who have graduated from an HBCU?
2. How does an HBCU impact the general, racial/ethnic, and sexual orientation identities of male graduates who are Black and gay?
3. Are the experiences of Black gay men at an HBCU markedly different from their experiences in mainstream White society?
4. How do Black gay men make meaning of their time while attending an HBCU?
Significance of the Study

The experience of oppression is damaging for those who are oppressed. This study is significant in that I explore whether or not Black gay men have experienced any forms of oppression (e.g., heterosexism, homophobia) while attending an HBCU. There may be cultural nuances in the language and institutional forces of an HBCU that are specific to the HBCU setting. This study is also significant because there is no existing research about the experiences of Black gay men who attend HBCUs. This study examines not only the lived experiences of Black gay men who graduated from an HBCU, but it also explores the impact that this type of institution has on the multiple identities of this particular culture of men.

One’s experiences while in college affect his/her life in a number of ways. Students face a variety of issues in their cognitive, moral, and psychosocial development that “are more diverse and complex than ever in the history of higher education” (Evans, Forney, Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. xi). The development of one’s identity is a lifelong task, and the events that one experiences while in college strongly aids in such development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1950, 1968; Rogers, 1990). In Erikson’s (1950, 1968) model, psychosocial development occurs in sequential stages when biological aspects converge with psychological aspects of their being. Rogers (1990) viewed human development as existing “throughout the lifespan and that a basic underlying psychosocial structure guides this development” (p. 122). These models offer thorough means for studying identity development.
The research that examines more specific aspects of identity development may focus on gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, or age (McKinney, 2004). For example, Black gay men are often marginalized as a result of not fitting the ascribed norms of a dominant culture (McEwen, 1996; Schlossberg, 1989). Thus, if these students feel marginalized on campus, developing a sense of identity may be more challenging. When students feel marginalized, the need to matter to others increases (Schlossberg, 1989). Mattering is “our belief, whether right or wrong, that we matter to someone else” (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 9). Therefore, the importance of understanding the experiences of marginalized students and the meanings that these students attach to their experiences is paramount in aiding their growth and development (McKinney, 2004).

Theories of both ethnic and gay identity development emerged during the 1970s. Born from the social sciences and influenced heavily by the work of Erikson (1968), several authors have studied the issues and challenges associated with identity formation (Evans, Forney, Guido-Dibrito, 1998, Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Theories of ethnic/racial identity development may aid in understanding the lived experiences of Black men (Cross, 1971, 1991, 1995; Jackson, 1976, 2001; Phinney, 1990). However, ethnic identity development models do not fully address the experiences of Black men who also identify as homosexual. Many gay identity models have received attention in higher education literature (Cass, 1979, D’Augelli, 1994; Fassinger, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1998; Troiden, 1988, 1989). While these models have influenced both the progress of and the support for gay men, none of them have specifically addressed the issues that confront Black gay men.
For Black gay men, the struggle is not only coping with the strains of racism brought on by non-Black communities; but also dealing with homophobia and heterosexism brought on by the Black community as well as non-Black communities. This study therefore has the potential to educate and to guide communities to understand the challenges that Black gay men experience and how these experiences might contribute to a status of lived oppression.

Rationale for Qualitative Studies

There is not a body of research that explores the lived experiences of Black gay men who have attended an HBCU. Because of this deficit in the literature, conducting qualitative research is most appropriate in order to explore and generate working hypotheses about the experiences of this specific cultural group (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Quantitative measures, on the other hand, are deterministic, and not concerned with asking questions in order to explore how one creates meaning of his/her world (Cohen & Manion, 1994). In order to explore, collect, examine, and analyze the personal narratives and reflections of this particular culture of men, I must become immersed as a participant-observer in their lives. Therefore, exploring the lived experiences of Black gay men with an undergraduate degree from an HBCU may be understood best by conducting phenomenological research within the qualitative paradigm (Creswell, 1998).

Definition of Terms

*Black:* Refers to individuals of African heritage having similar cultural and racial/ethnic experiences (http://www.uihome.uidaho.edu/default.aspx?pid=82354).
Coming out, or Out: GLBT individuals who choose to share their sexual orientation identity with others (http://www.thecenter.ucla.edu/sexorien.html).

Down Low (DL): A term used to define men who secretly have sex with men while in sexual relationships with women. Men on the DL do not identify as gay or bisexual. Although the term is often linked to Black men, the behaviors associated with the term are neither unique nor specific to any particular racial/ethnic group (King, 2004; http://gaylife.about.com/cs/gay101/a/dl.htm).

Family: The creation of alternative or non-biological family support units in the gay community; a term that refers to one’s membership of the gay community (e.g., “he/she is family”) (Hawkeswood, 1996).

Gay/Homosexual: Refers to individuals whose primary attractions are to people of the same sex/gender. Typically, men who are attracted to men are referred to as gay; and women who are attracted to women are referred to as lesbians, though they may also identify as gay (http://www.thecenter.ucla.edu/sexorien.html).

GLBT/LGBT: An acronym that refers to individuals embraced by the gay community and stands for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender; or, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (http://www.thecenter.ucla.edu/sexorien.html).

Historically Black College and University (HBCU): An institution of higher learning established as a result of racism to educate Black students who were prohibited from attending predominantly White institutions of higher learning (Nichols, 2004).
**Heterosexism:** As an attitude, it is the belief that heterosexuality is the preferred sexual preference and the only normal sexual orientation, and that all others are inferior. As a social system, it is the system of laws and cultural attitudes based on the belief that heterosexuality is preferable, normal, and/or right (http://www.thecenter.ucla.edu/sexorien.html).

**Homophobia:** A fear of homosexuals and fear of establishing close relationships with the same sex; an attitude of disgust, repulsion, or hatred towards GLBT people based upon the belief that homosexuality is morally wrong, disgusting, or shameful (http://www.thecenter.ucla.edu/sexorien.html).

**Predominantly White Institution (PWI):** An institution of higher learning once responsible for educating only White students. Today, a PWI is an institution of higher learning in which the majority student population is White (Debra & Wright, 2003).

**Queer:** A formerly derogatory term that has been embraced by mainstream GLBT communities as an all-encompassing term that refers to all individuals who defy sexual or gender norms, including transgender or transsexual individuals (http://www.thecenter.ucla.edu/sexorien.html).

**Same Gender Loving (SGL):** A term created and used by homosexuals in the Black community. More than the mainstream identity label, “gay,” SGL is considered by many in the Black community to be a more descriptive label of the emotional links between Black people who identify as homosexual (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Same_gender_loving).
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter is divided into three major sections. The first section deals with issues facing Black gay men in identifying with the Black community, including the church, and the gay community. This section concludes with a discussion of the impact of multiple minority identities. The next section concerns pertinent theoretical perspectives of identity development. The final section examines the issues of gay college students, and pinpoints specific occurrences of sexual harassment of gay students at different HBCUs. Each section reveals the overall lack of research about Black gay men who attend HBCUs, and reinforces the need for this study.

This chapter begins with an exploration of viewpoints about oppression of Black gay men in general, followed by a discussion of homosexual oppression in the Black community, including the Black church. Following this, I discuss the coping strategies of people of devalued groups and Black gay men in particular. Then, various perspectives and theoretical models, including gender belief systems, racial/ethnic and sexual orientation identity development models are reviewed. These perspectives provide context and support for this qualitative study about the lived experiences of Black gay men. Lastly, I review the literature about gay college students, discuss sexual harassment, and visibility of gay college students, and highlight the lack of research about Black gay men who attend HBCUs.
Issues of Membership in the Black and Gay Communities

*Homosexuality in the Black Community*

When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community: the Black press, the Black church, Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left. Where is my reflection? I am most often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or I am tolerated if I am silent and inconspicuous. I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts me deeply. (Beam, 1986, p. 231)

While there is an increase in the number of individuals who do not support discrimination based on sexual orientation, a significant number of people express negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002). Many Americans believe homosexuality is an unacceptable, immoral choice, and that homosexuals should not teach in schools, serve in the military, or parent children (Lacayo, 1998).

Greene (1994) described the Black community as being “extremely homophobic and rejecting…generating the pressure (for Black gay men) to remain closeted” (p. 246). Homophobia in the Black community is linked to a variety of forces including: moral beliefs that are tied to strong religious beliefs, heterosexual privilege that is shared by both African American and dominant cultures, internalized racism, and a perceived shortage of single, Black, heterosexual men (Greene, 1994).

Black gay men frequently find themselves participating in a world of perpetual conflict as the Black community harbors negative and hostile views towards gay people (Clarke, 1983). Icard (1986) discussed how homosexuality is considered “a White
problem inimical to the interests of Blacks” (p. 86). According to King (2004), “gay is White…you can’t be Black and gay…you can’t live in your community. You can’t go to church. You can’t join a fraternity” (p. 19).

Any tolerance of homosexuality in the Black community comes with an implicit restriction that individuals must not display or disclose any parts of their sexual orientation (Savin-Williams, 1996). Black gay men experience greater pressures than Whites to marry, and to have children (Icard, 1986). If Black gay men do not make any part of their sexual orientation visible, then they will not be totally rejected (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002). As a result, Black gay men are more than likely to deny their homosexuality and identify as heterosexual due to perceived homophobia in the Black community (Lewis, 2003).

According to Battle and Lemelle (2002), Black heterosexual males harbor more negative attitudes than their female heterosexual counterparts toward Black homosexual males. These authors also found that when factors of age, education, and church attendance were considered, the gender difference was even stronger; Black heterosexual males possessed less positive attitudes toward Black gay males.

Even though some scholars suggested that the Black community is more disapproving of homosexuality than the White community, Blacks’ opinions on gay civil liberties and employment discrimination are similar to Whites’ opinions. When factors of age and education were controlled, Lewis (2003) found that Blacks remained more disapproving of homosexuality, but moderately more supportive of gay civil liberties and markedly more opposed to anti-gay employment discrimination than Whites.
Both religious attitudes and religiosity correlate with negative attitudes toward homosexuality in general and within the Black community in particular. Disapproval of homosexuality is highest among born-again Protestants, those who attend religious services frequently, who pray frequently, and who say religion is a substantial part of their lives (Battle & Lamelle, 2002; Lewis, 2003). In American society, Blacks are more religious than Whites, more likely to be fundamentalist Protestants, and more likely to believe in a God who sends misfortunes as punishments (Taylor, 1993; Lewis, 2003).

In their study of Latino, Black, and White attitudes toward homosexuality, Bonilla and Porter (1990) found that Blacks are the most conservative of all groups on the morality of homosexuality. According to these authors, the conservatism of Blacks in their attitudes toward gays “may be explained in part by the strong disapproval of homosexuality expressed by Black churches; Black churches may be more conservative on the morality issue because of their Southern fundamentalist origins” (p. 447).

Boykin (1996) described the Black church as a place of compassion and strength for the Black community, but a mixed blessing for Black gays and lesbians. Many Black churches condemn homosexuality. Historically, the Black church has dictated the Black community’s stance on homosexuality—“either you talk about it, or you condemn it” (http://www.hrc.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Coming_Out/Get_Informed4/Communities_of_Color2/African-Americans/Religion1/Religion.htm).

This unwelcoming stance may explain why many Black gay men cite their religion as being the reason for not being open about their sexual identity (Brown, 2005). Despite their presence as active, tithing members of the church, Blacks who identify as
homosexual are subjected to a world of silence and denial within the Black church (Boykin, 1996). Perpetrators of this subjugation include: “Black ministers, deacons, ushers, choir members, music directors, organists, congregations, and homosexuals themselves” (Boykin, 1996, p. 127).

Dyson (2001) suggested the need for Black churches to begin embracing the many faces of sexuality that Black churchgoers possess, thereby decreasing the exclusion of Black homosexuals from Black churches. Creation of such a community in every Black church, both Non-Christian and Christian, may unite homosexuals and heterosexuals in the Black community.

In spite of blatant homophobia within the church community, many Black gay men retain strong attachments to their heritage, and usually cite their Black identity as the primary component in their self-concepts (Greene, 1994; Loiacano, 1989; Sears, 1995; Wall & Washington, 1995). In a study examining reference group memberships, psychological health, and social adjustment of Black gay men, Johnson (1982) found that 62% of the sampled population reported their primary reference group identification as Black; the remaining 38% identified primarily as gay. Johnson (1982) found no significant differences between the two groups on measures of psychological adjustment, a finding that may confirm the idea that either personally affirmed identity can help Black gay males achieve comparable levels of mental health (Cross, 1991).

While few members of either group reported high levels of active involvement in the broader Black community, the majority still considered being Black as primary. This finding supports the contention of other authors who have written about Black gay men
(Loiacano, 1989; Greene, 1994; Sears, 1995; Wall & Washington, 1995). Nonetheless, Black gay men are placed psychologically in a position of triple jeopardy as they are “threatened by society-at-large, the Black community, and the gay community” (Icard, 1986, p. 91).

Wise (2001) referred to this struggle as a triple consciousness in which Black gay men become aware of what it means to exist as a Black man in White society, to exist as a being whose sexual orientation is different from the majority, and to be a gay man in the Black community. Black gay men who come out have to struggle to manage conflicting loyalties between their communities of allegiance, to balance aspects of personal identity that can sometimes be at odds with either community, and to resist marginalization (Sauvé, 1997).

**Black Gay Men in Mainstream Gay Society**

Icard (1986) and Loicano (1989) declared that Black gay men experience identity conflicts within the gay community in general, as well as within the Black community in particular. They contend with incidents of racism, stereotyping, prejudice, and unequal treatment in the gay community that many perceive as White-dominated and unsupportive.

Icard (1986) stated that many Black gay men do not receive “the kinds of positive consequences that have been defined as so important to the closure of the individual’s sexual identity…(and the gay community) reflects the values and customs of that segment of the larger White society associated with high society” (p. 90). Many Black gay men cope with heterosexism and racism by affiliating with one community more than
the other (Icard, 1986, Wilson & Miller, 2002). That is, Black gay men “may better cope with heterosexism by removing themselves from the predominantly heterosexual Black communities and cope with racism by removing themselves from the predominantly gay White communities” (Wilson & Miller, 2002, p. 373).

On the other hand, Brown (2005) discovered that contemporary Black gay men confront problems when faced with placing their identities along a hierarchy. For many Black men, the challenge is whether to identify as Black first or as gay first. Terms such as Black gay—a man who identifies as Black, and happens to be gay; and gay Black—a man who identifies as gay primarily have been used to describe Black gay men (Wilson & Miller, 2002). In this study, both Black gay and gay Black are used interchangeably because both identities are significant to one’s being; additionally, the experience of being Black and the experience of being gay share a common bond: oppression (Boykin, 1996). Brown (2005) stated that many Black men do not want to identify at all with the label, “gay.” Rather, they have created “a new hierarchy of identities or labels (e.g., same gender loving, or SGL) to substitute their sexual identity” (p. 30).

Perhaps to identify as gay is to accept a label both prescribed by and subscribed to by dominant White gay society. Social exclusion of Black gay men is one of the most common forms of racism practiced by the White gay community (Boykin, 1996). Similar to the projections of heterosexual media, images of Eurocentric beauty are typically projected by White gay media “that transmit messages of inferiority to Blacks and others who do not fit into the White stereotype” (Boykin, 1996, p. 216).
Being both Black and Gay

While every member of the Black community experiences a sense of “otherness” explicitly and implicitly in the form of racism, the gay community experiences additional instances of explicit and implicit heterosexism. According to Wilson and Miller (2002), although both forms of oppression denigrate and devalue individuals and both forms of oppression contribute to the invisibility of sexual and racial minorities within mainstream media and culture, claiming visibility and establishing otherness may have greater importance in the day-to-day fight against heterosexism than in the day-to-day fight against racism (p. 388).

Boykin (1996) discussed how oppression at its most basic level is the same for nearly every group, including Blacks and homosexuals. Oppression, according to Boykin (1996), manifests in three forms: “internal oppression as the individual struggles with his or her identity; sub-set oppression from others, who share a general group identity; and external oppression from those who dislike the group…oppression differs from group to group, so racism differs from anti-Semitism, which differs from sexism, which differs from homophobia” (p. 56).

Furthermore, while one may recognize the experiences of oppression as being the same, yet different for particular groups, there seems to be similar internal, psychological consequences of oppression experienced by both Blacks and homosexuals; “both are taught to see themselves as second-class citizens, often undeserving of society’s acceptance unless they live up to the highest standards and assimilate into the majority culture’s stereotypical view of itself” (Boykin, 1996, p. 58). Oppression by the dominant
culture, intends to “teach the oppressed to hate themselves but also to hate one another, pitting minority against minority in a senseless contest to replicate the oppressor” (p. 57).

All oppressed people feel ignored and misrepresented, and Black gay men experience cultural pressure to remain silent, invisible, and closeted as gay men in the Black community, as Black men in gay society, and as both in the heterosexual, White majority culture. Black gay men “must learn to cope with two distinct forms of oppression: heterosexism and racism” (Wilson & Miller, 2002, p. 372). These struggles to balance all the conflicts of their subcultural identities may be important for many Black gay men, and may also be salient for many Black gay college men who have attended HBCUs.

Coping Strategies of Black Gay Men

Wilson and Miller (2002) identified five strategies that gay Black men employ when dealing with non-gay friendly situations such as the church, family relationships, school or college, and the workplace. The strategies served three main functions: avoiding stigma; building buffers; and social change (e.g., standing your ground, accepting self). They included:

Role Flexing: This involved Black gay men altering their actions, dress, and mannerisms in non-gay friendly contexts, as these situations were perceived to be hostile or homoantagonistic. Role flexing manifested in the following ways: a. the macho extreme—conforming to heterosexual group norms regarding masculinity; b. being sanctimonious—assimilating to group norms established by church teachings; c. the cover up—using deceit to conceal one’s sexual identity from
others; d. passivity—maintaining a quiet and reserved demeanor in the presence of heterosexuals and listening to degrading, anti-homosexual comments without saying anything in response.

Keeping the Faith: While men in their study identified the church as being the most oppressive of non-gay friendly contexts, Wilson and Miller (2002) found that Black gay men who kept faith sought to cope with their sexual minority status by remaining close to God.

Standing Your Ground: This strategy included openly confronting people who spoke badly of gays, or standing one’s ground in his own defense.

Changing Sexual Behavior: This step involved avoiding contact with men to avoid the perceived negative consequences of being gay in an anti-gay environment.

Accepting Self: This strategy is characterized by Black gay males’ choices to replace negative attitudes about themselves as sexual minorities with positive attitudes. They decided to accept their sexual identity and were unwilling to change simply to fit in.

In contrast, Black gay men may reach a level of self-acceptance in gay friendly contexts when they feel comfortable being themselves, living both openly and freely (e.g., gay parts of town, gay clubs, places that are gay-friendly, or predominantly gay). According to Wilson and Miller (2002), behaviors used to cope with oppression in non-gay friendly contexts were not used in the gay friendly contexts. Wilson and Miller (2002) identified
creating a safe space as the only coping strategy utilized by their sample of Black gay men in gay friendly contexts.

“Men created gay space by bringing together cliques of men (e.g., friendship circles). These cliques were often described as an alternative family…this alternative family provided some of the emotional support that biological family members were unable to provide” (Wilson & Miller, 2002, p. 383).

Unlike their White counterparts, homosexuals from underrepresented backgrounds must cope with the development of their ethnic, sexual orientation, and racial identities simultaneously and interactively (Loicano, 1989; Sears, 1991; Wall & Washington, 1991). They have multiple identities that are affected by cultural oppression. Reynolds and Pope (1991) utilized case studies to illuminate how these individuals may cope with multiple identities. Their Multidimensional Identity Model suggests four possible coping mechanisms:

1. One may identify with only one aspect of his/her identity (e.g., ethnicity or sexual orientation) in a passive way. This identity is assigned by society, including peers and family.

2. One may choose to address one form of oppression and identify with only one dimension of their identity. This could be an attempt to be accepted.

3. One may identify with multiple aspects of the self, but in a “segmented fashion” (p. 179). For example, while one may be both Black and gay, he/she may not identify as gay in environments that are or appear to be threatening to that particular identity.
4. One may choose to identify with multiple identities simultaneously, thus integrating them into his/her sense of self.

Tajfel and Turner (1986) identified three strategies employed by individuals who are members of a devalued group:

1. Individual Mobility—if possible, the individual chooses to physically leave the group and change group membership, or if group membership is not modifiable, such as ethnicity, then the individual chooses to psychologically leave his or her group by disidentifying with the group.

2. Social Creativity—the group as a whole chooses to redefine the meaning of their group membership by comparing themselves with the out-group on a dimension on which they are superior or by changing the values assigned to the attributes of the group from negative to positive. For example, the term, “queer” has been reclaimed as a positive by mainstream gay culture.

3. Social Competition—the group as a whole fights the current system to change the hierarchy of group membership in society.

There are disconnections in the current literature about Black gay men. On the one hand, the literature suggests that Black gay men strive to balance living within their multiple sub-cultural identities. On the other hand, the literature states that Black gay men may cope with their sub-cultural identities by removing themselves from those specific communities when they feel threatened (Greene, 1994; Loiacano, 1989; Wall & Washington, 1995; Wilson & Miller, 2002).
I may uncover how Black gay men live within their sub-cultural communities as this study seeks to learn about the lived experiences of Black gay men with an undergraduate degree from an HBCU. Because of the aforementioned disconnections in the scholarly literature, both the need for and relevance of this study are further reinforced.

In his study of Black gay men who reside in Harlem, Hawkeswood (1996) discovered that Black gay men were able to establish a niche in Black society while also asserting a sense of pride about their dual identities as Black gay men. That is, Black gay men created a community that consisted of social networks of other Black gay men. Hawkeswood (1996) notes:

While this community also includes non-gay kin and friends, it is the core group of gay friends, who refer to each other by kin terms, that forms its backbone. Gay Black men symbolically refer to this community they have constructed as “family,” as in “We are family,” (or) “He’s family” (p. 190).

As gay Black men are subjects of both racism and homophobia in larger society, this “family” is a symbol of both empowerment and support; and is a reminder that gay Black men “all have a place in the community and are all connected by a space they share and lives that intertwine” (Hawkeswood, 1996, p. 193). This finding is consistent with the work of Wilson and Miller (2002) who found that within gay friendly contexts (e.g., gay parts of town, gay-friendly people, gay clubs) Black gay men created community by bringing together cliques of other Black gay men—often described as an “alternative
family” (p. 383) as it provided the emotional support not provided by biological family members.

Theoretical Perspectives and Models of Identity Development

Theories of identity development have been heavily influenced by the works of Erikson (1968), which posited that the search for and development of one’s identity relates to the impact of social forces and events on one’s psychological well-being. In addition to general theories of identity development, particular theories have explored gender identity, racial identity, and sexual orientation.

This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of Black gay men who have graduated from an HBCU. People of color and people who identify as gay or lesbian must contend with the psychological interpretation and social devaluation of their gender, ethnic, and sexual orientation identities by mainstream society. As a result, “when faced with a context that devalues one’s group, the person may have to engage in a process to negotiate the meaning of his or her identity” (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006, p. 1).
The Gender Belief System

Masculinity versus Femininity. Connell (1995) suggested that hegemonic masculinity plays a huge role in heterosexual males’ antigay attitudes. According to Wilkinson (2004), “hegemonic masculinity allows for subordination and marginalization patterns that guarantee and express the legitimate dominance of certain subtypes of men over other men who belong to the wrong subtypes. Among the “right” and “wrong” subtypes of men is the division based on sexual orientation” (p. 123).

The gender belief system (GBS) proposes that an individual’s pattern of beliefs about gender-related factors, such as stereotypes, social and sexual roles, and physical appearance, derive from societal expectations regarding what is appropriate for men and women (Deaux & Kite, 1987; Kite, 2001, Wilkinson, 2004). Kite and Whitley (1995) suggested heterosexual males’ negative attitudes toward gay men stem from the gender socialization process in which men learn to condemn behaviors and characteristics considered feminine. Gay men who illustrate masculine attributes may not experience as much condemnation as those who exemplify more feminine characteristics. In the GBS, heterosexual men dislike their gay counterparts because “they are taken to represent a violation of the way men are supposed to be (e.g., non-feminine)” (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 122). Since the sociological construct of masculinity prescribes strength as a descriptor for men, gay men are often represented or perceived as weak because of their sexual orientation (Wise, 2001).

Ethnicity also plays a role in gender beliefs. The process of arriving at “Black masculinity” involves:
ascertaining certain values, morals, and experiences and enacting specific responsibilities. Black manhood also implies understanding this state of being in relation to family, community and the larger society. It is necessary to emphasize race in relation to masculinity…because the characterizations within the literature reflect the oppression and racism that Black men have had to endure (Wise, 2001, p. 6).

According to Boykin (1996), masculinity is a construction that makes both homosexuality and bisexuality taboo, and Black men not only define masculinity based on the images constructed by mainstream society, but they also hyper-masculinize their gender image: “the factor of race distinguishes Black masculinity from masculinity in general” (Wise, 2001, p. 6). While “White men validate their manhood through economic empowerment, education and climbing the social ladder…for Black men it’s all about sports, sexual prowess and the ability to feel dominant over someone” (Price, 2001, p. 31).

Since the Black male role model is masculine and strong (Kalb & Murr, 2006), Black gay men behave in accordance with this concept of cultural masculinity in order to avoid ridicule and silencing (Wise, 2001). “If one expresses masculinity, he is not hated as vociferously for his homosexuality as his effeminate counterpart” (Brown, 2005, p. 34). Connell (1995) asserted that Black men are expected to: 1. be as close to hyper masculine and sexist as possible in order to escape homophobia from heterosexuals—Black and non-Black alike; 2. be or act homophobic as a means of acceptance; 3. participate in the hierarchy of men, which actively demeans homosexuality, reinforcing
the notion that “to be a man in contemporary American society is to be homophobic…to be hostile toward gay men particularly (p. 736).

This hostility drives Black gay men into a state of fear to be and to live as out, gay men. This hostility also contributes to the silencing of Black gay men, thus relegating them to a life in the closet and living on the down low (DL): secretly indulging in homosexual behavior while keeping up the appearance of being heterosexual—and maintaining some semblance of a relationship with their girlfriends or wives (King, 2004).

The manhood and masculinity of Black gay men are threatened within both White society and the larger Black community. The cultural, political, and social forces of hegemony reinforce the condition of masculinity as being non-characteristic of homosexuals (Connell, 1995).

Models of Racial/Ethnic Identity Development

In order to better understand the lived experiences of Black gay men, it is important to examine how they come to identify with their racial/ethnic group. Racial identity is defined as “a sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group” (Helms, 1993b, p. 3). The empirical research focusing on the racial and ethnic identity of college students is plentiful.

I chose to focus on three models of racial/ethnic identity development in this section. These models were chosen because of their prevalence in the literature and their focus on how the process of identity development for individuals of underrepresented

*Cross’ Model of Psychological Nigrescence.* While the research now includes the experiences of underrepresented groups, including Latino Americans and Asian Americans, Cross’ model deals with the social psychology of Blackness and was originally directed toward African Americans. Cross (1995) defined psychological nigrescence as a “resocializing experience” (p. 97) in which an individual experiences a cyclical transformation from non-Afrocentrism through Afrocentrism, to interculturalism. Cross (1971, 1991, 1995) described this positive conversion as a 5-stage, sequential process occurring over the lifetime in the African American individual’s psyche. The five stages of psychological nigrescence include: preencounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment.

Race was viewed as unimportant in the original conceptions of the *preencounter stage.* One viewed the world with Eurocentric lenses which made him or her pro-White and subconsciously anti-Black; attitudes and values reflected White normative standards, thusly devaluing or denying Blackness in terms of social group identification.

Cross (1995) revised this theory, and indicated that preencounter African American attitudes may range from race-neutral (where being Black does not play a significant role in life) to anti-Black. While race-neutral Blacks are likely to work hard to erase the social stigma associated with being Black, anti-Black African Americans view Blackness through lenses of adverse racial stereotypes, while upholding Whiteness as the preferred racial status.
An individual experiences an encounter that shatters his or her current identity and worldview in the *encounter stage* (Cross, 1995). Rather than an isolated incident, individuals typically experience a series of small encounters that snowball. This stage occurs in two steps: (1) undergoing an encounter, and (2) being affected by it in a powerful way. In the first step, he/she is the “object of an encounter event or activity” (Cross, 1995, p. 105); in the second step, the individual personalizes the encounter to the point that he/she sees the world in a whole new light.

In the *immersion-emersion stage*, one becomes more immersed in Black culture while withdrawing particularly from Whites. As the individual settles into his/her new Black identity, he/she become less reactionary (toward Whites), and begins to see his/her immersion as a transitional stage of continual growth (Cross, 1995).

*Internalization* occurs as individuals identify their primary reference group as being Black, while also living a more pluralistic existence. In this stage, relationships with other racial/ethnic groups are renegotiated as the new Black identity is internalized.

In the final stage, *internalization-commitment*, one lives his/her new identity and participates in important activities that address concerns and issues shared by Blacks and other oppressed and underrepresented groups.

*Jackson’s Model of Black Identity Development.* Originally constructed in the 1970’s, Jackson’s model of Black identity development sought to understand the Black experience, and how the transformations of this experience affected how Black people behaved, viewed themselves, related with each other, and managed their individual worlds. Today, Jackson (2001) acknowledged that while this model may apply to most
Black people, it would be more accurate to refer to it as the African American Identity Development Model as her original research pool was made up of largely African Americans. At the time of her original research though, it was not common to refer to Americans of African heritage as African American (Jackson, 2001).

Jackson’s (1976, 2001) model of Black identity development consists of five stages of development or consciousness. The stages are: (1) naïve—the absence of a social consciousness; (2) acceptance—which suggests the acceptance of the prevailing White/majority description and perceived worth of Black people; (3) resistance—the rejection of the prevailing majority culture’s definition and valuing of Black people and culture; (4) redefinition—the renaming, reaffirming, and reclaiming of one’s sense of Blackness, Black culture, and racial identity; (5) internalization—the integration of a redefined racial identity into all aspects of one’s self-concept or identity. The stages of acceptance and resistance can manifest themselves as either passive (unconscious) or active (conscious). Both redefinition and internalization are defined as active because they involve conscious choices; and the naïve stage is defined as passive.
Phinney’s Model of Ethnic Identity Development. According to Phinney (1989), for individuals of underrepresented groups, the issue of ethnic identity is crucial to the development of a positive self-concept. Phinney’s (1989) model of ethnic identity development is theoretically based on the works of Erikson (1968), is identical to Marcia’s (1980) ego identity statuses, consistent with other models of racial/ethnic identity development, and is applicable across ethnic groups (Phinney, 1993).

Phinney’s model of ethnic identity development is comprised of three distinct stages: (1) unexamined ethnic identity—in this stage, individuals have unexamined positive or negative views of their ethnic group; (2) ethnic identity search (moratorium)—during this stage, one becomes involved in exploring and seeking to understand the meaning of ethnicity for oneself; (3) achieved ethnic identity—in this final stage of Phinney’s model, individuals establish a clear, confident sense of their own ethnicity, while also discovering comfort within their underrepresented culture. In this stage, one typically achieves a positive ethnic identification, and is also open to learning about other cultures.

Criticisms of Racial/Ethnic Identity Development Models. The available models of racial/ethnic identity development do not represent the wealth of information that practitioners in higher education need to know in order to create communities conducive to students exploring dimensions of their own racial identity (Evans, Forney, Guido-DiBrito, 1998). More information is needed about non-White students as U.S. colleges and universities become more diverse. Therefore, more knowledge about how students of color develop their ethnic identities and manage psychologically in homogeneous
environments (be they predominantly Black or White) is necessary from both a short-and-a-long-term perspective (Casas & Pytluk, 1995).

Additionally, there is a severe lack of research focusing on students whose homosexual identity is interwoven with their race/ethnicity, ability, or other demographic characteristics. Research in this area is necessary to progress understanding of the complex intersecting patterns of multiple identity development (Evans, Forney, Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Lopez & Chism, 1993). The research participants of this study represent a specific cultural group, Black men who also identify as same gender loving. The intricacies of how these men lived and existed within this particular culture while attending an HBCU may be revealed in this study.

*Stage Models of Sexual Orientation Identity Development*

Models of sexual orientation identity development must be examined in order to explore and better understand the lived experiences of Black gay men. It is important to explore how these men come to identify with gay culture. As homosexual students enter college, it is likely that they will have completed or will have already begun the coming-out process since youth are identifying as homosexual or bisexual at increasingly earlier ages (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Troiden, 1989). Whether in the process of learning who they are, deciding how to portray themselves to others, how they will fight homophobia, or how they preferred to be labeled, students continually think about identity issues (Lopez & Chism, 1993).

Although the following models do not focus on Black gay men and women per se, they focus on the coming-out process and the internal conflicts experienced by
homosexuals during it (Cass, 1979, 1984; D’Augelli, 1994; Fassinger, 1991; Savin-Williams, 1988; Troiden, 1988). The major stage models of homosexual identity are listed below. Although the models differ, they share common themes and traits.

*Cass’ Homosexual Identity Formation Model.* Cass (1979, 1984) developed the Homosexual Identity Formation Model, which is one of the most widely cited development models in the literature. It describes a six-stage process of identity development. Cass (1979) acknowledged that foreclosure of one’s identity can occur depending on a person’s choice as he/she progresses through the model.

One becomes aware of homosexual thoughts, attractions, and feelings in the *identity confusion* stage. As one begins to question assumptions about his/her sexual orientation and has thoughts and feelings about others of the same gender, he/she may choose to deny his/her feelings, seek more information, or describe the experience as something out of which they will grow.

*Identity comparison* occurs as one begins to compare his/her feelings with others he/she knows to be homosexual. In this stage, people often maintain the public identity of being heterosexual. As feelings of alienation persist, individuals may attempt to “explain” their homosexual behavior, change it, or totally inhibit the behavior.

In the *identity tolerance* stage, one acknowledges that he/she is gay, but has not yet identified as gay to others. In order to reduce feelings of isolation, he/she begins to seek out others who are gay. While negative experiences may lead to identity foreclosure, positive experiences in this stage may aid in disclosing one’s identity.
Individuals accept their new identity and have positive feelings about being homosexual in the *identity acceptance* stage. This stage involves selective disclosure of identity to others who may be supportive. This process is called “coming out.” Social groups, including mainstream society, influence this process. Some may continue to pass as heterosexual though, depending on the situation or environment.

*Identity pride* occurs as one becomes immersed in the gay culture. He/she may become less involved with heterosexual people in order to focus on other activities related to their gay orientation. In this stage, individuals may feel disconnected from both the values and culture of heterosexuals. At this stage, he/she is publicly out and positive responses from heterosexuals help him/her to progress.

In the final stage, *identity synthesis*, one integrates his/her gay identity into his/her being as a complete person. That is, homosexual identity is now viewed as an aspect of life. There is less of a dichotomy between homosexual and heterosexual cultures. In this stage, one becomes more aware of other qualities in addition to his/her sexual orientation.

*D’Augelli’s Gay Identity Development and Sexual Orientation Model.*

D’Augelli’s (1994) model of gay identity formation is more interactive, holistic, and based on a social constructivist view of sexual orientation than Cass’ model. In this model, both the physical and psychological development of a gay person may be best understood when one considers the “simultaneous descriptions of the person’s social network, neighborhood and community, institutional setting, and culture” (p. 317).

D’Augelli (1994) presented three sets of interrelated variables that help to form identity: (a) personal subjectivities and actions—including how individuals feel about
their sexual identity, their sexual behaviors, and the meanings attached to those behaviors; (b) interactive intimacies—including how family, parental, peer group, and intimate relationships influence the meaning attached to experiences with significant others; and (c) sociohistorical connections—including the social customs, public policies and laws found in various environments and locations, and the cultural concepts during certain historical periods. According to D’Augelli (1994), one’s sexual identity “emerges from many social exchanges and events experienced in different contexts over an extended period” (p. 324). These experiences are influenced by a person’s social, political, and cultural contexts.

D’Augelli proposed that gay people move through six developmental processes which include: (1) exiting heterosexual identity—generally involves the person understanding that his/her sexual orientation is not heterosexual; (2) developing a personal gay identity status—one begins to interact socially with other gay people, and develops personal stability that takes into account his/her thoughts, feelings, and desires. An additional element of this process is identifying and coping with one’s own internalized homophobia.

The process of developing a network of people who know the individual’s sexual orientation and are able to provide him/her with social support describes (3) developing a gay social identity; (4) becoming a gay offspring—one chooses to come out to his/her parents which often leads to disruption of parental relationships. Family support is as important as social support but is often not received by the individual who comes out; (5) developing a gay intimacy status—one explores intimacy with someone of the same sex.
Developing such relationships may be hindered by a lack of gay couple role models. The lack of cultural scripts may force individuals to form personal or community specific norms and traditions; and (6) entering a gay community—one becomes aware of the structure of heterosexism and of laws and policies that limit the rights of gay citizens. This stage involves “the development of commitments to political ad social action” (D’Augelli, 1994, p. 327). A person’s involvement in this stage is dependent on the nature of his/her environment or situation.

_Fassinger’s Sexual Minority Identity Model._ Fassinger (1988) presented a dual model of sexual orientation identity that separates an individual’s gay identity development from his/her identity as a member of a gay specific group/community. Each model is divided into four stages. Both models consist of the following stages: (1) _awareness_—the person feels different from others. Group members recognize differences in the gay community; (2) _exploration_—the individual begins to have strong same-sex erotic feelings. Group members seek to explore the attitudes and beliefs of others toward gay culture; (3) _deepening/commitment_—one begins to crystallize his/her identity as sexual minorities through the choices they make. There is a commitment to a deeper self-knowledge. As part of a group, one becomes aware of oppression by mainstream, heterosexual communities, and how it can adversely affect the gay community; (4) _internalization/synthesis_—people begin to define themselves according to their new identity. There is a sense of comfort and pride, and this identity is integrated into their greater identity. Group identified individuals may get involved with community action surrounding gay issues.
Savin-Williams’ Pattern of Gay Identity Development. According to the Savin-Williams’ (1998) model of gay identity development, there are 10 chronological stages of development. Based on narratives of gay men, Savin-Williams (1998) suggested that there are wide ranging developmental markers, but concedes that not all markers may be experienced by all gay men.

The stages of this model include: (1) identifying feelings of “difference” from gender norms of other males; (2) identifying attraction to other males; (3) understanding the definition of homosexuality; (4) labeling feelings as “homosexual;” (5) experiencing sex with another male; (6) experiencing sex with a female; (7) labeling self as “gay” or “bisexual;” (8) disclosing self-label to others; (9) experiencing a romantic relationship with a male; and (10) fostering a positive identity.

Troiden’s Formation of Homosexual Identity. Approaching homosexual identity development from a sociological perspective, Troiden’s (1988) model represents the life stories of gay men thematically analyzed and categorized into clusters according to life stages. Unlike purely linear models of homosexual identity development which suggest one must follow a certain path to identity formation, Troiden’s (1988) model suggested that stages of homosexual identity development occur in “back-and-forth, up-and-down ways,” (p. 47) where one may experience overlap and relapse of stages.

The stages of Troiden’s (1988) formation of homosexual identity include: (1) sensitization—occurring before puberty, in this stage most do not see homosexuality as personally relevant. Feelings of marginality and perceptions of being different from peers exist. The significance resides more in meanings than in experiences; (2) identity
confusion—during this stage, sexual identities are in limbo when adolescents begin to reflect on the potential for them to be homosexual. They can no longer fully accept their prescribed heterosexual identity; (3) identity assumption—one self-identifies as homosexual. The disclosure to others begins the process of coming out. Positive interactions with other gay people help to facilitate this identity formation; (4) commitment—in this stage, one accepts his homosexual identity. Characteristics of this stage include self-acceptance and comfort living as an out, gay man.

Criticisms of Stage Models of Sexual Orientation Identity Development. Because these stage models of gay identity development are often cited in research and educational literature, many assume that they depict the full developmental process of sexual orientation identity (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). However, these models have been criticized for being too linear in scope, and most of the models do not account for the specific factors that affect identity (Broido, 2000; Levine & Evans, 1991). These development models have also been based on White, educated, middle class, gay men and lesbians, ignoring the complex cultural issues that affect the identity development of gay men and women of color (Smith, 1997).

While the first three components of these models (a general sense of feeling different, an awareness of same-sex feelings, and a point in which feelings can be labeled as homosexual) may be somewhat universal for all gay men and lesbians, the construction of one’s gay identity may differ for Black gay men and lesbians based upon various social and environmental factors (Martinez & Sullivan, 1998).
Many assumptions about coming out have been developed through research involving predominantly White or White-identified gay men for whom individualism, independent identity, and separation from family of origin are important parts of growing up. There has been little discussion of cultural differences in the meaning, process, or role of coming out, particularly but not exclusively for people who are not White and middle class (Smith, 1997, p. 281).

Accordingly, attempting to apply stage models of gay identity to gay Black people, or more specifically, to Black gay men who attend an HBCU may be limiting (Chan, 1987; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). This study may reveal not only the cultural nuances involved in the coming-out process for Black gay men, but it may also reveal how these men define their cultural experiences while attending an HBCU.

Gay Students in College

Evans and Wall (1991) examined how PWIs are environments in which negative attitudes and discrimination against Black gay men and lesbians pervade both overtly and covertly in classrooms, residence halls, offices, student groups, and institutional policies. While documents reveal that Black gay men and lesbians experience similar obstacles of discrimination at HBCUs, there is no body of research that examines the lived experiences of this population at such institutions of higher learning. There is a gaping hole in the literature about the lived experiences of Black gay men who choose to attend HBCUs. Despite this limitation, the existing literature about gay college students may provide insights that will be useful in this study of Black gay men who have graduated from an HBCU.
While all students must create their own way and navigate the college environment, according to McKinney (2004):

gay students must also test these environments for specific issues in regard to their sexual identity, including the level of homophobia and heterosexism. Gay students must assess how they will fit into the environment, given the norms of the culture and its community members. The environment can play a key role in the gay student deciding whether or not to disclose his gay identity on campus (p. 34).

Increasingly, gay males are coming out in college (D’Augelli, 1991; Rhoads, 1994). Because young, gay people are considered “a forgotten, invisible minority” (Savin-Williams, 1990, p. 1), it is understandable that for Black gay men in college (both out and closeted), the tasks associated with adjusting to life as a college student are that much more complex (Herdt, 1989). The increased complexities experienced by these men are due to racism, homophobia, and heterosexism manifested at cultural and institutional levels (Obear, 1991; Boykin, 1996, Wall & Washington, 1991).

Reviewing college/university reactions to gay students over the past five decades, Dilley (2002) found that gay students experienced the following consequences due to their sexual orientation: 1. 1940s-1960s: expulsion; 2. 1950s-1970s: miscellaneous sanctions and interventions; 3. 1940s-1990s: student surveillance and sting operations; and 4. 1970s-1990s: legal opposition to student speech and assembly.
Sexual Harassment of Gay College Students

It is not an uncommon theme for gay college men to experience harassment in the classroom, residence halls, fraternities, and/or simply walking about campus (Bourassa & Shipton, 1991; Hughes, 1991; Lopez & Chism, 1993; Rhoads, 1994). According to the Hill and Silva (2005), sexual harassment of both homosexual students and students perceived as being homosexual occurs at all types of college campuses, but is most prevalent at larger institutions.

Gortmaker and Brown (2006) found that while out students experienced more negative campus climates than closeted students, both groups reported instances of being treated unfairly and having to mask their sexual identity from other students in threatening environments. The degree to which one is out of the closet typically leads to increased victimization (D’Augelli, 1992). According to Gortmaker and Brown (2006), both out and closeted students in their study reported similar amounts of anti-gay attacks from other students.

According to Sandler and Shoop (1997), unwelcomed verbal or physical conducts of a sexual nature are indicative of sexual harassment when “such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with a person’s work or academic performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working, learning, or social environment” (p. 4).

Data indicate that gay men are frequently the victims of verbal and physical assaults, and the large majority of incidents are not reported to any college officials (D’Augelli, 1992; Hughes, 1991). According to D’Augelli (1992), gay men typically fear
for their personal safety, and many report hiding their sexual orientation at times because of fear of rejection or abuse. In a study of GLBT faculty, staff, and students at 14 U.S. colleges or universities, Rankin (2003) found that more than half of the participants believed that GLBT people were likely to be victims of harassment on campus. In addition, almost half of the respondents in this study rated the climate of their campus as homophobic; and over half of the respondents felt that gay men were most likely to be the victims of anti-gay harassment and/or beatings.

Hill and Silva (2005) surveyed over 2,000 college students, age 18 to 24, across ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender to learn of their experiences with sexual harassment while in college. They found that 42% of the research population knew someone who was sexually harassed based upon being perceived as homosexual (e.g., were called gay, lesbian, or a homophobic name, such as faggot or dyke); and 24% of the research population were themselves victims of this form of harassment. When examined by gender, the survey consisted of 1,096 female and 940 male students. The survey results showed that 13% of women, and 37% of men had been harassed because they were perceived as being gay; compared to the 10% of women and 25% of men in this survey who said they sexually harassed others they perceived to be homosexual.

When examined by ethnicity, the survey consisted of 340 African American students; 316 Latin American students; and 1,183 Caucasian students. Caucasian students experienced non- (physical) contact harassment more often than their African American and Latin American counterparts. However, the experience of contact (physical) sexual harassment produced results that were not statistically significant across ethnicity; 33%
of African American students; 29% of Latin American students; and 32% of Caucasian students experienced contact sexual harassment because they were perceived to be homosexual.

When examined by sexual identity, the study consisted of 155 GLBT students and 1,881 heterosexual students. Of those surveyed, 73% of GLBT students experienced sexual harassment more often; compared to 61% of heterosexual students; 72% of GLBT students experienced non- (physical) contact sexual harassment; compared to 59% of heterosexual students. Finally, 44% of GLBT students experienced contact (physical) sexual harassment; compared to 31% of their heterosexual counterparts.

“Prejudice against gay college students has negative implications for their overall developmental success and safety, as well as longer term interactions in the greater society” (Bowen & Bourgeois, 2001, p. 95). The chronic stress experienced by gay men due to peer and adult harassment has been associated with school-related problems, anxiety, low self esteem, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation (Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991; Savin-Williams, 1994). These issues are additionally heightened by the lack of needed support while in college (D’Augelli, 1991).

**Sexual Harassment of Black Gay students at HBCUs**

Many HBCUs were founded by religious organizations. Therefore, the tone regarding homosexuality in both the Black community and the HBCU community is not likely to be accepting. Church leaders are often cited as reinforcing this tone regarding homosexuality across the Black community (http://seattlepi.nwsource.com). This section chronicles reported instances of homophobia and/or sexual harassment of gay students at
different HBCUs. Each institution profiled in this section does not necessarily represent the institutions from which the research participants of this study graduated.

*Central State University.* Located in the Midwest, Central State University is an HBCU with a proud tradition of educating African Americans. This school has an active Greek campus system, and has no protection for employees from discrimination by sexual orientation institution. In 2005, two gay students of this institution were jailed after interrupting a skit that made fun of gay people. The skit depicted gay men trying to join a sorority, and was approved by the institution ([http://www.gaypeopleschronicle.com/stories05/june/0624056.htm](http://www.gaypeopleschronicle.com/stories05/june/0624056.htm)).

In 2006, Central State University invited prominent author and Black gay male, Keith Boykin to deliver its keynote address at the institution’s annual convocation. “Respect” was the title of the convocation ceremony. Boykin was eventually booed and jeered when he began to tell his coming-out story. When the speaker began to discuss religion and homosexuality, the auditorium of students became more hostile and yelled rude objections throughout the remainder of his speech. After he concluded, the adult organizer of the event demanded the students’ respect for the next speaker ([http://www.keithboykin.com/arch/2006/10/25/central_state_u](http://www.keithboykin.com/arch/2006/10/25/central_state_u)).

*Hampton University.* According to reports, at this Southern university, blatant homophobic comments made by students in the classroom are not really challenged by professors. Some students on this campus feel that a support group for gay students is needed now, more than ever as gay and lesbian students have become increasingly visible. There has been an effort by students on this campus to get a charter for a gay-
straight student alliance from the institution since at least 2004

Although its code of conduct for administrators, faculty, staff, and students
prohibits discrimination based on several variables, including what it describes as “sexual
preference,” Hampton University has yet to recognize an organization that would support
gay students (http://www.washblade.com/print.cfm?content_id=9936).

Howard University. Located on the East coast, Howard University is a premiere
institution with a list of famous alumni. In 2002, a gay male student was verbally
harassed and physically attacked by several members of the institution’s marching band.
After the gay male student accidentally bumped into a female band member while trying
to leave the fine arts building, other band members began to shout degrading and anti-
homosexual slurs, such as “faggot” before eventually crowding around him and attacking

As the crowd surrounded the gay student, a campus official intervened, and
identified himself as a campus official. Instead of retreating, some band members began
attacking not only the gay student, but also the campus official. Mostly male students
attacked these individuals (http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A43748-

Since 2000, Howard has had an on-campus support organization for gay and
lesbian students. While the institution has over 10,000 students who attend the main
campus, less than 40 students are members of this organization. There may be gay
students who feel that participation in this organization would hinder their chances of
being involved in other organizations or public events at the institution. Nevertheless, this organization is both visible and accessible, and is contributing to improved treatment of the institution’s homosexual student population (http://washblade.com/print.cfm?content_id=7698).

*Morehouse College.* United by ideals of brotherhood, and known for producing strong and prominent Black men, there have been a few published incidents of sexual harassment and physical violence against gay male students, or male students perceived to be gay at this prestigious college.

In 2002, a heterosexual male student was physically assaulted because he was perceived to be homosexual. The attack occurred in the bathroom of a residence hall. The student was beaten with a 26-inch baseball bat. He was bashed at least seven times in the head, back, shoulders, and was left bleeding on the bathroom floor by his attacker. This young man later underwent emergency brain surgery to remove a near fatal blood clot. He left the hospital with a seven-inch scar along the left side of his head. He will also suffer a lifetime of headaches, seizures, and possible memory loss as a result of the attack (http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0333,lee,46206,1.html).

The attacker was a fellow student who lived in the same residence hall. The attacker was expelled from Morehouse, and also arrested. The attacker was eventually found guilty of aggravated assault and battery, and sentenced to a pair of 10-year prison sentences. Because the young man who was assaulted identified as being heterosexual, the attacker was not found guilty of a hate crime (http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0333,lee,46206,1.html).
In an attempt to create a more safe and supportive campus for both heterosexual and homosexual students, following this brutal attack, the Morehouse administration asked the following questions of alumni: 1. How far should the institution go to separate heterosexuals and homosexuals in the residence halls? 2. To what degree do you think homosexuality is immoral? 3. How much does Morehouse’s reputation for enrolling homosexual men affect your pride in the college? 4. How much should Morehouse allow students to be open about their homosexuality on campus? This survey caused uproar as its opponents felt it reinforced the segregation and down-low (DL) culture of gay students, and did little to foster acceptance of homosexual students by students, faculty, and administration. The questionnaire results have not been published (http://www.keithboykin.com/arch/2003/04/18/a_tale_of_two_c).

Occurring less than a year after the brutal attack of the student perceived to be gay, another incident of alleged anti-gay bias occurred at Morehouse. As a gay student passed by a group of young men standing outside of the cafeteria on-campus, the group of young (presumably heterosexual) men began to verbally harass and jester toward him, calling out derogatory names, including “faggot.” The gay student confronted the men, who began to mock and laugh at him in response. The gay student retaliated by pulling a toy gun from the bag that he was carrying, and threatened one of the men in the group who harassed him. Both the gay student, and the man on whom the toy gun was drawn, were taken into police custody (http://www.sovo.com/2003/7-4/news/morehouse.cfm).

As far as on-campus support units for gay students, Morehouse has a semi-active gay student organization, which was started in response to the brutal attack in 2002. The
group however does not meet on the Morehouse campus. Efforts to begin such a group many years before were met with resistance from the institution’s administration (http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0333,lee,46206,1.html).

*Johnson C. Smith University.* In 2002, a gay Black male student was walking with his boyfriend when a heterosexual Black male student began yelling anti-gay slurs, and threatened to shoot the gay Black male student (http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0333,lee,46206,1.html).

This incident inspired the gay Black male student to take action. He organized a forum on diversity and sexual minorities, which was a first for Johnson C. Smith University, located in the South. The forum was based on not only his unfortunate encounter of homophobia and sexual harassment, but it was also based on: similar stories of harassment of other gay students; the many students living on the DL on campus; and stories of attempted suicides of gay students on campus because of difficulty coming out. Expecting only a dozen people to attend, the forum had nearly a hundred attendees (http://www.hrc.org/Template.cfm?Section=African_Americans&Template=/ContentMana...).

As a result of this forum, this Black gay male student began a campus group for gay and lesbian students. Unlike the approval process for other student organizations, this institution had to consult with their attorneys, as they feared the school would lose funding if they recognized an organization for gay and lesbian students. Students who attended the aforementioned forum collaborated with outside GLBT organizations, and considered getting the press involved about the delay of a decision by the university’s
administration. Finally, a letter from the administration approving the GLBT student organization was received. It took approximately one year for the GLBT student organization to be approved at Johnson C. Smith University (http://www.hrc.org/Template.cfm?Section=African_Americans&Template=/ContentM
ana...).

The above institutional profiles represent only a sample of data collected through unobtrusive document collection. These incidents of both overt and covert homophobia can make life at an HBCU challenging and uncomfortable for gay students. Yet and still, young African American adults who identify as gay or lesbian are choosing to attend HBCUs. The latter suggests that in spite of possibly challenging environments, Black gay students are also able to enjoy certain benefits from attending HBCUs. Both the challenges and benefits of having attended an HBCU as a gay Black man may be revealed as a result of this study.

*Building Support for Gay Students at HBCUs*

In the wake of increased violence and harassment at different HBCUs towards both gay students, and students perceived to be gay, some HBCUs have taken steps to become more welcoming and affirming. Such measures include approving student organizations aimed at supporting GLBT populations or building coalitions between homosexual and heterosexual students (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual student groups, or gay, straight student alliances).

The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) has also gotten involved with making HBCUs more welcoming institutions for Black gay students. Thus far, 13 HBCUs have
participated in their Historically Black Colleges and Universities Program
(http://www.hrc.org/Content/ContentGroups/Coming_OUt1/HBCU_Outreach/The_History_of_HRCs_HBCU_Program.htm).

The goals of this program are to “educate and organize students, faculty and administrators at HBCU campuses on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues specific to each institution’s needs. It opens campus-wide debate on GLBT issues, often for the first time. And it trains students to build viable student-led GLBT or GLBT-friendly organizations on campus” (http://www.hrc.org/Content/ContentGroups/Coming_OUt1/HBCU_Outreach/Historically_Black_College_and_University_Outreach_Program.htm).

Visibility of Gay College Students

When students feel marginalized on college campuses, their need to feel as though they matter to someone else increases (Schlossberg, 1989). There are little-to-no visible supports and services on college campuses to meet the many needs of gay students, and institutional policies and classroom curricula sometimes overlook or exclude gay students and their concerns (D’Augelli, 1994). Of the over 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States, only 10% of them list sexual orientation in their campus-wide non-discrimination policy (Herrschaft & Mills, 2004).

According to Cavanagh (2002), gay students should consider the following standards when looking at whether colleges will welcome them: (1) the number of openly gay students on campus; (2) the number of out faculty members and administrators; (3) institutional resources (e.g., outreach for gay students); (4) student resources (e.g.,
student organizations for gay students); and (5) classes taught (e.g., courses offered with an emphasis on gay culture).

Rhoads (1994, 1995, 1997) has conducted extensive research about gay college students. In an ethnographic study examining the experiences of gay college students who were involved in the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Student Alliance (LGBSA), Rhoads (1995) discovered that socialization plays an important role in the experiences of gay students and that coming to terms with a gay identity is not only an individual process, but it is also a way to generate more awareness and political acceptance on a college campus.

Rhoads (1997) also found that gay students are more likely to feel comfortable being out on campus when surrounded by a supportive network of friends. For the students of Rhoads’ (1997) study, visibility as a gay person was essential in order to affect society’s perceptions of homosexuality and to become recognized by members of both heterosexual and homosexual communities.

Due to both the political nature and visibility of the students in Rhoads’ (1997) study, tension on the college campus mounted. While some students felt that it was necessary to be highly visible in order to incite change, other students rejected the notion that all gay students needed to act politically for change. Racial differences among gay students also played a part in the tension on campus. Rhoads (1997) highlighted that the Black gay men of his study experienced difficulty living dual identities as well as navigating a predominantly White institution of higher learning.
Many gay college students eventually come to terms with or resolve problems stemming from stigmatization; many overcome internalized homophobia and fears of rejection, learn to manage personal threats, and generally lead happy, productive lives (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Rhoads, 1994, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1990). In a study of gay students between the ages of 19-to-22, Savin-Williams (1990) found that they had positive self-images and were coping well with their gay identity.

Summary

This chapter underscores the need for a study about the lived experiences of Black gay men with an undergraduate degree from an HBCU, as there is no existing literature about this specific culture of men. This chapter included the following: an exploration of viewpoints about how Black gay men cope with oppression within the Black community and the mainstream gay community. After reviewing the coping strategies of Black gay men, I reviewed various perspectives and theoretical models, including gender belief systems, racial/ethnic identity development models, and sexual orientation development models. Lastly, this chapter reviewed the scholarly literature on gay college students, discussed the sexual harassment and visibility of gay college students, and highlighted the need for this study about the lived experiences of Black gay men who graduated from an HBCU. These viewpoints and theoretical perspectives aid in the construction of a framework that contextualize and support the need for this study.

While many authors have studied the experiences of gay college students from a mainstream perspective (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994, 1995; Rhoads, 1994, 1995; Savin-
Williams, 1990; Troiden, 1988), the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men at HBCUs have not found their way into the higher education literature.

Through both the exploration and examination of their personal histories and self-reflections, this study will shed light on how the research participants of this study created meaning of their lives while attending an HBCU.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter concentrates on the methodology utilized to explore the experiences of Black gay men who have graduated with an undergraduate degree from an HBCU. Firstly, I discuss the rationale for this study, including qualitative research, naturalistic inquiry, and phenomenology. Next, I highlight the participants of this study, which include the selection of both the sample population and the various HBCUs from which they have graduated. Data collection and data analysis are then highlighted, followed by a discussion on the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Lastly, I point out the ethical considerations and my role as researcher in this study.

Rationale for Design

*Qualitative Research and Naturalistic Inquiry*

The existing literature on gay college students mostly relies on quantitative measures. The foundational assumptions of quantitative measures are (1) determinism—that phenomena have causes; (2) empiricism—that theory about phenomena is verifiable; (3) parsimony—that theory is refined by way of economical explication; and (4) generality—that refined theory is readily generalizable toward prediction and control (Cohen & Manion, 1994, pp. 13-14). These assumptions have led to generalizations and theories about gay culture, but they do not meet the needs of this study because quantitative methods ignore the consideration of and understanding for how one creates meaning and experiences life. In order to learn about the lived experiences of gay Black
male students who have graduated from an HBCU, an alternative methodology is required.

Why Qualitative Research? The aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Black gay men who completed an undergraduate degree at an HBCU. The experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who attend HBCUs have not been included in the higher education literature. Thus, it is necessary to explore the reflections and experiences of this population in order to gather information about how Black gay men create meaning of their world while at an HBCU; rather than to make any assumptions about their experiences that might not be accurate.

According to Creswell (1998), one should choose a qualitative approach when he/she: (1) wants to ask how or what; (2) has a topic that needs to be explored; (3) wants to present a detailed view; (4) studies individuals in a natural setting; (5) wants the writing to be more personal; (6) wants to spend sufficient time and resources on data collection and analysis; (7) has an audience that is receptive to a qualitative approach; and (8) wants to emphasize the role of researcher as active learner.

In this study, I sought greater insight into the meanings that Black gay men make of their undergraduate collegiate experiences at an HBCU, and how these meanings relate to their general identity, particularly their identity as Black gay men. This understanding of the insider’s perspective may enlighten others about the lived experiences of Black gay men in college.

The qualitative research paradigm allows the researcher more flexibility in data collection than in the quantitative research paradigm. For example, it is much more likely
for qualitative researchers to employ multiple methods of data collection (e.g., journals, interviews, participant observation) during the course of one study (Patton, 2002). Sample sizes tend to be smaller in qualitative research because the aim is to provide a *thick description* of a phenomenon—a “description that goes beyond the mere or bare reporting of an act, but describes and probes the intentions, motives, meanings, contexts, situations and circumstances of action” (Denzin, 1988, p. 39; Geertz, 1973).

Additionally, in qualitative study, samples tend to be purposeful instead of random (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is used to identify potential participants with certain characteristics (e.g., Black gay men). That is, purposeful samples are cases that are selected because they are “information rich and illuminative” (Patton, 2002, p. 40).

The researcher is considered to be the primary instrument of the study in qualitative research (Patton, 2002). The researcher spends a great deal of time with participants and is immersed in the research setting (Spradley, 1979). Because the focus of qualitative research is on individual, person-to-person interactions, the setting for qualitative research is naturalistic which means that interactions occur in places where people live their everyday lives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

*Naturalistic Inquiry Axioms.* Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified five axioms that are an intrinsic part of naturalistic inquiry as rooted in the qualitative research paradigm. These involved: (1) *the nature of reality*—the existence of multiple realities and how those realities will diverge over time; (2) *the relationship of knower to known*—both researcher and informant cannot escape having influence over each other; (3) *the possibility of generalizability*—moving toward “working hypotheses” that describe the
individual; (4) the possibility of causal linkages—distinguishing cause-effect connections are impossible as “all entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping” (p. 38); and (5) the role of values in inquiry—inquiry is bound in values in the naturalistic paradigm.

**Naturalistic Inquiry Characteristics.** In addition to the naturalistic axioms which are fundamental to qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified 14 characteristics of naturalistic inquiry as rooted in the qualitative research paradigm that included: (1) qualitative research occurs in the natural setting; (2) the researcher him/herself is a data-gathering instrument; (3) qualitative research results in the production of tacit (intuitive knowledge); (4) qualitative research utilizes a variety of methods to capture the many realities of the phenomenon being studied; (5) qualitative researchers purposefully select research participants in order to maximize richness of data; (6) qualitative researchers analyze data inductively as they seek to describe both the setting and how participants interact with that setting.

The remaining naturalistic inquiry characteristics described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) include: (7) grounded theory is developed as qualitative researchers discover phenomenon that are mutually shaped, and “may be explicable only in terms of the contextual elements found” (p. 41); (8) the interaction between inquirer and participant is “largely unpredictable in advance” (p. 41); (9) outcomes of data are negotiated with research participants as they “can best understand and interpret local value patterns” (p. 41); (10) to account for the many realities encountered, qualitative research is reported descriptively; (11) research data is interpreted “idiographically (in terms of particulars of the case)” (p. 42); (12) data gathering processes are unique to the setting and cannot be
duplicated, and therefore applications of findings are open-ended; (13) as the researcher and participant become immersed in the study, the scope of the research project is determined; and (14) qualitative research utilizes alternative criteria for establishing trustworthiness of the data in place of the validity and reliability criteria of the positivistic research tradition.

**Phenomenology**

The axioms and characteristics of naturalistic inquiry as rooted in the qualitative research tradition will guide this phenomenological study of the lived experiences of Black gay men with an undergraduate degree from an HBCU (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Patton, 2002). Born out of the extensive writings of German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1895-1931), phenomenology describes the meanings, structures, and essences of the lived experiences for a person or group of people about a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). In this study, I explored the phenomenon of being a Black gay male undergraduate student at an HBCU.

“Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). In order for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of a participant’s experiences, the researcher must explore the essence of the participant’s experiences and highlight the *intentionality of consciousness*; which contains both the outward appearance and inward consciousness experiences of a participant based on his/her memory, image, and meaning (Creswell, 1998). Accordingly, in order to truly know what another person experiences, phenomenological research
requires the phenomenologist to experience the phenomenon as directly as possible through participant observation and in-depth interviewing (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002).

Phenomenology is the study of how people describe things through their senses. According to Husserl (1931), one can only know what he/she experiences by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken the conscious awareness. While one’s understanding comes from sensory of phenomena, in phenomenology, it is important that the experience is described, explicated, and interpreted (Patton, 2002). In phenomenological research, reality of a person’s experiences is not objective. Rather, how one describes and attaches meaning to his/her subjective experiences “incorporates the objective thing and becomes a person’s reality, thus the focus is on meaning making as the essence of human experience” (Patton, 2002, p. 106).

According to Van Manen (1990), phenomenologists are less interested in the factual status of particular events: whether something happened, how often it tends to happen, or how the occurrence of a particular experience is related to the prevalence of other conditions or events. For example, I would not ask the participants of this study, “How does being a Black gay male influence choosing to attend an HBCU?” Rather, I may ask, “What is the essence or nature of one’s experiences as a Black gay male at an HBCU?” The latter question allows for better understanding of what this particular experience may be like for members of this particular culture.

Thus, conducting phenomenological research requires: 1. the phenomenologist to get at the essence of the experience of a phenomenon; 2. a belief in and understanding of consciousness as active and subjective; 3. the phenomenologist to treat each participant’s
unique set of experiences as truth; 4. the focus on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience; 5. the phenomenologist to engage in rigorous analysis of the experience to identify basic elements of the experience that are common to members of a particular group, or even society at large (Creswell, 1997; Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1990).

Participants

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Black gay men who graduated with an undergraduate degree from an HBCU. The research participants in this study comprised a purposeful sample of gay Black men who graduated from an HBCU (Patton, 2002). Utilizing a purposeful sample of men produced data that were more detailed, thus increasing awareness of the depth of the lived experiences of each participant (Patton, 2002).

Selection of Sample

McCracken (1988) suggested that in focused, exploratory research, the quality of the experiences matters more than the quantity of participants involved. This study examined the in-depth experiences of four Black gay men with an undergraduate degree from an HBCU who volunteered to be interviewed. Each participant completed an undergraduate degree at least five years prior to his interview. At the time of their interviews, the participants were 27 to 30 years of age. Additionally, each participant of this study was: (1) an alumnus of an HBCU who spent at least 2 years at the HBCU from which he graduated; (2) self-identified as a Black man, or a man of African descent; and (3) self-identified as openly gay, or homosexual.
Identification of HBCUs

While there are studies that focus on gay students and their experiences at PWIs, there are no studies that focus exclusively on gay students who attend HBCUs. My decision to focus this study on the lived experiences of Black gay men who graduated from an HBCU solidified after discovering instances of blatant homophobia and sexual harassment of gay students, or students perceived to be gay on some HBCU campuses. The institutions in which these events occurred do not necessarily represent the institutions from which the men of this study graduated.

In order to protect both the identity and personal reflections of each research participant involved in this study, the HBCU from which he graduated remained confidential throughout. Each HBCU referenced by the participants in this study was referred to generically, and given a fictitious geographic location (e.g., “he graduated from a small HBCU located on the West coast”).

Data Collection

Biographical Sketches

According to Van Manen (1990), a participant’s biographical information is a useful data source. Thus, to aid the formation of each participant’s profile, he was asked to complete a short autobiographical sketch (Appendix A).

Documents

I researched archival data to gain a better understanding of the treatment of gay student communities at HBCUs. Creswell (1998) believes that archival data is an opportunity for researchers to collect data in an unobtrusive manner. Unobtrusive data are
“powerful indicators of the value systems operating within institutions” that offer the researcher richer insight and deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Hatch, 2002, p. 117; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Researcher Journal

It was important to document my personal journey during the course of this study. I maintained a personal journal to aid in the collection of data, and to highlight my own subjectivity throughout this study (Appendix B). Maintaining a personal journal also provided an opportunity to process and reflect upon my own experiences during this study on a deeper level (Hatch, 2002; VanManen, 1990).

Interviews

The semi-structured interview. I conducted semi-structured interviews as a primary source of data collection in this study (Patton, 2002). I utilized a list of questions and issues to be explored (Appendix C). For example, I asked each participant a series of questions relating to his experiences as a gay Black male at an HBCU. This form of interviewing provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject…it makes sure that the interviewer has carefully decided how best to use the limited time available in an interview situation (Patton, 2002, p. 343).

I maintained a certain structure in each interview, and allowed for the development of unplanned and unpredicted topics, which provided “flexibility, spontaneity, and responsiveness to individual differences and situational changes” (Patton, 2002, p. 343).
Each research participant selected for this study was interviewed twice, each interview ranging from 60 to 90 minutes in length. A third interview was utilized to follow-up with each participant. Schuman and Presser (1981) developed a three-interview design and stated that the first interview should focus on the context of one’s experiences, the second interview should describe one’s experiences, and the third interview should reflect on the meaning of one’s experiences.

According to Weiss (1994), qualitative interviews are appropriate sources for data collection when the researcher seeks to: (1) develop detailed descriptions; (2) integrate multiple perspectives; (3) describe the process; (4) develop holistic description; (5) learn how events are interpreted; and (6) bridge intersubjectivities. Thusly, utilizing both the interview guide and the informal conversational interview produced rich data about the lived experiences of gay Black men who graduated from an HBCU.

At the conclusion of the interviews, interview tapes were transcribed. McKinney (2004) suggested that, “researchers must study the transcripts by marking and labeling them in order to see the connections among the experiences of the participants” (p. 60). Thus, I selected and categorized response passages from the interview transcripts in order to conduct analysis of the data.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

I conducted a thematic analysis of the data. The goal of thematic analysis is to uncover themes that are alive in the data (Van Manen, 1990). According to Creswell (1998), data analysis in phenomenological research is a detailed process. First, I read the
entire description multiple times. Second, I found statements (from the interviews) about how participants experienced the topic, listed these significant statements (called, horizontalization of the data) and treated each statement as having equal worth. I worked to develop a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements (Creswell, 1998; Grbich, 2007; Patton, 2002, Van Manen, 1990).

After horizontalizing the data, I grouped the statements into thematic units, and wrote a textural description of the experience, including verbatim examples. Fourth, I reflected on my own experiences, sought all possible meanings and divergent perspectives, varied the frames of reference about the phenomenon, and constructed a description of how the phenomenon was experienced. Fifth, I constructed an overall description of the meaning and the essence of the experience. This process was followed firstly for my account of the experience and then for that of each participant. Finally, a composite description was written. The goal here is for the reader to finish the phenomenological report with a better understanding of the essence of the experience, and to recognize unifying meanings of the experience (Creswell, 1998, p. 55; Grbich, 2007; Patton, 2002, Van Manen, 1990).

Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

In this study, I am interested in gaining enough information to provide a thick description of the research participants and their lived experiences while students at an HBCU (Geertz, 1973). This objective requires that the following criteria are present: credibility, triangulation, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These criteria are requisite in order to establish trustworthiness in
naturalistic inquiry. Trustworthiness in the qualitative research paradigm is parallel to validity, reliability, and objectivity found in the quantitative research paradigm (Patton, 2002).

Credibility

As a measure of trustworthiness, credibility is the probability that “credible findings and interpretations will be produced” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301). Credibility is operationalized by activities appropriate to this study, which include participant observation, prolonged engagement, member checks, and triangulation. As I explored the lived experiences of the participants, I became immersed in their lives as a participant observer. Prolonged engagement “requires the researcher to invest sufficient time in the research site in order to learn the culture and generate trust” (Hasan, 2004, p. 67).

Because I am an out, Black gay man, I possess a general understanding of the cultural and lived experiences of other gay Black men. This understanding constituted a form of prolonged engagement. Credibility increased as I built trust among research informants in their natural environments. Triangulation, which is discussed next, furthers the credibility of this study.

Triangulation

“Triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods” (Patton, 2002, p. 247). This study has the advantage of utilizing methodological triangulation, “the use of multiple methods to study a single problem or program” (Patton, 2002, p. 247). That is, research informants of this study participated in interviews and completed a personal
biographical sketch. I also conducted member checks, “a summary of an interview played back to the person who provided it for a reaction” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Additionally, I researched institutional documents in order to learn more about the experiences of gay students at HBCUs. Thus, combining the above methods helped to increase and to strengthen the trustworthiness of this study.

Transferability

Transferability involves purposeful sampling, and providing “the widest possible range of information for inclusion in the thick description” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). The men of this study represented a purposeful sample. As a phenomenologist, I engaged in thick description of the research informants and their environment through participant observation, informant interviews, and follow-up interviews.

Dependability

Naturalistic inquiry is also trustworthy when dependability is established through an audit of procedures, creating an audit trail (e.g., raw data, records) for others to follow (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to ensure dependability of this research, I maintained all notes, transcripts, and other collected material.

Confirmability

In naturalistic inquiry, confirmability shares similarities with dependability, but involves research participants directly. That is, naturalistic inquiry is confirmed when research participants aid in the review of the data and clarify claims and categories developed as part of the analysis of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I focused on
confirmability in this study by asking research participants to reflect on their responses from previous interviews.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations are important when designing and conducting any kind of research. The ethical treatment of participants was my priority throughout each phase of this study. As a naturalistic researcher, I attended to providing an environment free from harm, and deception for consenting participants; while also maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of both the participants and research data (Magolda & Weems, 2002; Punch 1994).

I followed all guidelines provided by Ohio University’s Institutional Review Board. After receiving informed consent for participation, I presented a comprehensive explanation of the goals of this study to all active research participants. After conducting participant interviews, I followed-up with each participant and asked him to reflect on his responses. This involved each participant in the interpretation of his personal reflections. These guidelines aided in the ethical treatment of these men and guarded against any intentional deception in the operation of this study’s methodologies.

Participants of this study were informed of how the data would be utilized, and what information would be available for publication. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect him from being identified. Each HBCU referenced in the study was given a fictitious geographic location (e.g., “a small HBCU located on the West coast”). These conditions protected the privacy of each participant and the confidentiality of their stories.
The Researcher

Researcher as Instrument

Naturalistic inquiry requires the researcher to be the primary instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), a researcher is an effective instrument when: 1. he/she has some familiarity with the subject or phenomenon and the setting under study; 2. he/she utilizes a multidisciplinary approach; and 3. he/she possesses good investigative and communicative skills; he/she has the ability to draw people out.

Because I wanted to learn about the lived experiences of Black gay men who attended an HBCU, it was requisite that I immerse myself in the lives of these men as a participant observer. Spradley (1979) stated that the participant observer comes to a social situation with two purposes: 1. to engage in activities appropriate to the situation, and 2. to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation (p. 54).

Additionally, Spradley (1979) identified the following characteristics of participant observers: 1. Explicit awareness—I moved from years of selective inattention, tuning out, not seeing, and not hearing; to paying attention to information normally excluded; 2. Wide-angle lens—I approached social life of participants of this study with a wide-angle lens, taking in a much broader spectrum of information; 3. The insider/outsider (emic/etic) experience—I experienced both insider and outsider perspectives during the course of this study; 4. Introspection—By using myself as a research instrument, my level of introspection increased. Introspection enriches the data
that is gathered during participant observation; 5. Record keeping—I maintained copious
notes and kept a record of my experiences (Appendix B).

**Background and Subjectivity**

Many researchers have challenged the negative connotation attached to the term, 
*subjectivity* in naturalistic inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Peshkin, 1988, Wolcott,
1994). For qualitative researchers, “subjectivity is always a part of research from
deciding on the research topic to selecting frames of interpretation” (Glesne, 1999, p.
105). Peshkin (1988) has suggested that once recognized, subjectivity can be monitored
to aid in the production of trustworthy naturalistic research. One is attuned to his/her
subjective lenses when he/she is attuned to his/her emotions. According to Glesne (1999),

> It is when you feel angry, irritable, gleeful, excited, or sad that you can be sure
> that your subjectivity is at work. The goal is to explore such feelings to learn what
> they are telling you about whom you are in relationship to what you are learning
> and to what you may be keeping yourself from learning (p. 105).

In this study, principal sources of my subjectivity emerged from my background and
relationship with the research topic. I am an openly gay Black man. I knew at a very
young age that there was something “different” about me. Even though I knew that I was
gay as a child, I was socialized and taught to believe that being gay was not acceptable. I
received these anti-gay messages from numerous sources, from the foster homes in which
I was raised, to the Black church that I attended. While I never denied being gay if
someone asked, I never confirmed it either. I was fearful of coming out at a young age
because of the possibility of negative consequences (e.g., going to hell, being judged, being harassed).

Throughout my middle and high school years, education was both an escape and a passion. I became a student leader, and socially, gained a good deal of popularity. It was during this time that I found myself in a quandary. I was raised hearing negative messages about homosexuality; yet, I was popular and extremely involved in academic and extracurricular pursuits as a closeted, gay Black teenager.

It was extremely hurtful to be liked by so many because I possessed a fear that I would be shunned if I revealed my gay identity. This predicament inspired me to begin to live my life in truth. At age 16, I came out of the closet to myself, and to a few close friends. At age 17, after graduating from high school, I was completely out of the closet to both my family and my friends.

Much of my identity as both a Black and gay man developed while in college. Just as HBCUs are microcosms of the Black community, PWIs are microcosms of mainstream society. I attended a PWI. I was fortunate to be just as involved with academics and extracurricular activities in college as I was in high school. In college though, I identified as an openly gay Black man. I encountered many challenges when interacting within mainstream White society, the Black community and the White gay community. Overall, I consider those challenges as being positively germane to my college experiences; I also feel they prepared me for the real world. Additional autobiographical information is provided in Appendix B.
Summary

This naturalistic study utilizes phenomenological methodology to explore the lived experiences of Black gay men who attended and graduated from an HBCU. Each research participant participated in a series of in-depth interviews as a main source of data collection. As interview responses and other data were collected, they underwent data analysis, as rooted in the phenomenological paradigm, in order to find similar patterns and themes. The goal was to produce effective data findings in order to construct a phenomenology about the lived experiences of Black gay men with an undergraduate degree from an HBCU.
CHAPTER 4

SELF-REFLECTIVE PROFILES

Introduction

This chapter presents the profiles of four Black gay men with an undergraduate degree from an HBCU. In this chapter, I construct self-reflective profiles of the four research participants of this study. In order to create their self-reflections, I conducted both an audio and written review of the transcripts from each research interview. In constructing these profiles, I attempted to capture and assemble reflections of their lives as Black gay men, their decision to attend an HBCU, and their experiences while attending, and eventually graduating from an HBCU.

Identification and Selection Participants

The participants of this study were identified using a “snowball technique” (Patton, 2002). I presupposed that members of my professional and social networks, might personally know someone, or have access to individuals, who may personally know someone (e.g., a Black gay male) who graduated from an HBCU. Through these networks, I was introduced to four men who attended and graduated with undergraduate degrees from an HBCU.

Each prospective participant contacted me initially either by email or telephone. During my initial correspondence with each prospective participant, I introduced myself, the nature of my research, and informed him that his participation would be 100% voluntary. Because I sought a purposeful sample of Black gay men who graduated from an HBCU to participate in this study, I asked each prospect a few preliminary questions.
about his racial/ethnic identity, sexual orientation identity, undergraduate degree attainment (from an HBCU), and number of years as an undergraduate at an HBCU. In order to provide both a rich and textured account of each person’s experiences, each prospective participant was required to have spent at least two years as a student at the HBCU from which he graduated. To ensure confidentiality, both the participants and the HBCUs from which they graduated were given pseudonyms. Any persons or places mentioned by the participants were given pseudonyms as well.

Building Self-Reflective Profiles

The goal of each interview was to facilitate conditions for each participant to reflect on his life as a Black gay male. Alongside their experiences at an HBCU, each participant reflected on his journey, from childhood to present as a Black gay male in a variety of settings, including familial and societal. Through these individual descriptions, one may better understand the college experiences of the men in this study.

Each participant and I created a space in which the participant was free to speak candidly and unreservedly about his experiences. Each participant offered both anecdotal and descriptive information into his own experiences as a Black gay male at an HBCU. In order to understand the depth of each male’s experience, it was important to understand from where he came.

After completing final interviews, interview tapes were transcribed. Response passages from the transcripts were then selected and bracketed in order to create self-reflective “profiles” (Seidman, 1998, p. 101). These profiles were a representation of each participant. They were a foray into his life both past and present, as constructed by
the researcher. Each profile captured the essence of each participant’s experiences, and provided material to be analyzed and interpreted (Seidman, 1998). The construction of each participant’s self-reflection is representative of my own unique perspective at this time. That is, others may capture and write different self-reflections from those same transcripts. Perhaps, I would even construct the self-reflections of each participant differently at another time.

Each interview followed the same interview protocol. Interviewees were asked the same questions. However, the interviews were also semi-structured to allow for spontaneous and unscripted conversation and dialogue with each participant. Therefore, each interview flowed differently, and each participant provided tangential, yet vitally rich information to his interview. Because of the semi-structured nature of each interview, after examining their reflections, I did not “problematize incoherence;” at the same time, I did not actively “pursue coherence” (Hasan, 2004, p. 79). Rather, my goal was to search for passages that could be representative and descriptive of their reflections. The reflections of each participant are significant, and are representative of his subjective nature at that time.

Self-Reflective Profile: Zion

I traveled to the beautiful Southern city in which Zion resides during the month of May. As excited as I was to meet and to interview Zion, I was equally excited to visit his city as I had never been before. This city has experienced significant growth in terms of both its population and its business and industry. I reveled in the shuttle ride from the airport to my hotel suite. The vegetation that surrounded me on either window side was
so abundant, so thick, green, and alive: very much symbolic of the energy surrounding this city, and surely symbolic of the man that I interviewed, Zion.

A graduate of a small, public HBCU located in the South, Zion is an educator and community leader. He was caramel complexioned, and his well-groomed beard and thick black eyebrows complemented his baldhead. When he was not smiling, it would appear that Zion had a slight scowl upon his face. When he smiled though, his warmth was surely infectious. He spoke with confidence, but not in a manner that was commanding or demanding. During the telephone conversations prior to our interview, I found his voice to hold a steady volume. His voice was reminiscent of a singer’s speaking voice, as though speaking too loudly or too softly would strain his vocal chords.

Upon arriving to my hotel suite, Zion phoned me to ensure I made a safe arrival. He then asked if I was hungry. I was starving. And so, he picked me up after he left work, and we went for a bite to eat at a local restaurant. En route to the restaurant, Zion took me on a driving tour of his city. We drove through a central part of the city that was once vibrant and inhabited by the city’s Black middle and professional classes. According to Zion, with the emergence of suburbs, and the building of better schools in suburbia, the Black elite migrated to these areas, leaving the central area vulnerable to depreciation. The area is making a comeback though as the city is experiencing immense growth in its central and uptown areas. Much of this growth is due to major financial corporations recently becoming headquartered in this city. As a result, the city’s center and uptown areas are undergoing much restructuring and gentrification. The elite who fled to the suburbs are now being lured back to the central part of this city.
Along our drive was an HBCU of which Zion wanted to provide me with a tour. Although Zion did not graduate from this particular HBCU, I was excited to see the institution in-person. When we pulled up to the security gate, the security guard gave us a look that required us to state our business on the campus. Zion told him, “I just want to drive through to show him the campus.” With an affirmative nod, the security guard raised the gate for us to enter. The campus was quaint and quiet. All of the buildings seemed to be at arms length of each other. The campus was reminiscent of a country estate, consisting of a main building with a handful of supporting buildings that surrounded it.

The daylight became eclipsed by dusk as we drove with our windows rolled down. Attentive to everything within view, I was taking in the fresh air and the wonders of my new environment. After dinner, we conducted our interview.

“There Were Certain Things you Shouldn’t Do, or Shouldn’t Say”

Zion identifies as Black or African American interchangeably. He talked about his experiences growing up along with certain messages that he received about what it meant to be a Black man. Masculinity played a big role in his identification as a Black man.

My whole community was Black. All of my friends have always been Black. My stepfather was very much so masculine. My brother was masculine. I tried to be with my brother a lot. I followed him everywhere. I took the abuse that came along with following him. And just that message that being Black was very masculine. Being Black had a lot of pride associated with it. There were certain things you shouldn’t do or shouldn’t say; people you shouldn’t hang around with.
You shouldn’t have any feminine characteristics. I think at that point in time…I have been gay all my life. It was evident at that point where I was going. I think they (my family) were trying to get me to go another way…Play sports. I did for my enjoyment as well to please them. I played football, basketball when I could. In high school, I wrestled. So I enjoyed those things. I had boy friends (friends who were boys) at the time, for various reasons.

“The Pressure to be Masculine Was Challenging”

Zion felt a certain pressure to be masculine. Navigating the waters of being a self-proclaimed “mother’s boy,” along with being a “man’s man” was met with certain issues which affected both the dynamics of his familial relationships and his friendships.

My mother’s very loving. I’m a mother’s boy. So, she had that loving spirit of, “Be who you are, but also address some issues. Do it this way versus that way. Listen to your father.” She probably always knew as well as others (that I was gay) when I was growing up. With friends, I probably had similar issues, but I was tough. Fights would occur, but not around my situation, but just fights around the community. And, I was struggling to be accepted, I guess. I wasn’t one of the most popular kids in the neighborhood. I didn’t feel the need to be accepted. I hung out with whom I hung out with. I was different from other kids because I was in the accelerated classes. My mannerisms were different. My affiliation with my mother was different. So, I didn’t focus on sports as my only thing. I had all those things going. And, I didn’t dumb myself down to be accepted. So, that was different. I tried to be accepted, do the things they did; play the games they
played; be around them and listen. Since I’ve graduated high school, I have not heard from any of my friends from high school. But you know, 10-year reunion is coming up!

“I Wanted to See how Diverse the Black Perspective Was”

When asked why he chose to attend an HBCU, a pleasant smile filled Zion’s face, as though he traveled back in time to making his college decision.

I recall one of my good friends in college, he said, “The reason that I went to the HBCU was because I got tired of being the Black voice in the class.” Well, I enjoyed being the Black voice in the class. I enjoyed competing and saying how I felt, giving my point of view. I enjoyed that. So, that’s also why I went to an HBCU, to hear more of those Black voices in the class. I didn’t always know that I was going to an HBCU. But, my first year in high school, I went to a summer camp at my HBCU. I had a wonderful time with the people and my instructors. I established a relationship, a rapport with the people. Actually, all of my football coaches graduated from my HBCU also. So, all the Black teachers, or most of the Black teachers in my life went to an HBCU. That made the interest high. Of course, I wanted to go to Morehouse, the school that man built, you know, to be a part of that whole experience. I wasn’t accepted to Morehouse. I applied to my HBCU and I applied to Clemson. My HBCU offered me money, and offered me another summer program where I would come down, that I would get paid for, and I would get a scholarship in the fall, and I would receive credit hours while I was down there during the summer. So, the package deal was wonderful to go
there. And so, I went to my HBCU just for all those reasons that were included. When I went back down there for my interview process, my advisor during the summer camp for my ninth grade year, he helped me out. He was like, “I’m going to connect you with all the people you need to know.” He remembered me. It was four years later and he remembered me. I hadn’t contacted him since. So, it was good. I wanted to be a part of the Black experience. I wanted to be at an institution where I wasn’t the only Black person in a room talking from the Black perspective on a topic. And, I wanted to see how diverse the Black perspective was.

Choosing a Major

Zion majored in math. He enjoyed numbers and excelled in both math and history. His scholarship required that he major in a science based major. He also identified mentors that aided in his being successful in the major.

I chose math. I was good at math. I also wanted to be a teacher for a period of time. I knew I wanted to give back to my community. My ex-boyfriend says that I have this desire, this need to help people. So, I knew I wanted to be a teacher for a period of time in my life. I knew I was good at math. My scholarship required that you be a science major. I majored in math. If not math, I would have majored in political science. I chose political science as my minor. I’m good at history, but I hate dates. I don’t do dates well, but I can tell you what happened around those dates. I chose math. I did well in it. I understand how numbers work. My statistics professor was really good. I did well in his class. There’s not a high percentage
(of Blacks pursuing math and science majors). That’s part of the program I was in, increasing Black math students, increasing the numbers of Black people in math professions, who seek that. There’s a higher percentage that receive bachelor’s degrees, but we stop after a bachelor’s degree; similar to what I did. I said I don’t want to pursue any other degrees in mathematics. We stop quite often after the bachelor’s. I appreciate the science. I love the science. But, then we do something different around how we use that math degree.

Living on Campus

Living on campus for all four years of his undergraduate career, Zion had a roommate for only one of those four years. His college roommate experience was not a positive one, but he made the best of the situation and got through that first year.

I lived on campus all four years. I recommend anybody who goes to any school, live on campus as long as possible. I just found it to be a better experience. There were too many issues with people I knew who moved off-campus. You know, financial issues. My scholarship paid for everything. Why would I move off-campus when I had everything paid for, I had three meals a day. Why would I move off-campus? Everything is here. So, I lived on-campus all four-years. I had my room to myself three of those four years. My freshman year, I didn’t have the room to myself, which was kind of a problem, but after that, it wasn’t a problem at all. It was very weird because within the first week, he (my roommate) caught me with someone. He didn’t catch me with someone, but I had someone in the room when he tried to come by the room. And, I was like, “Wait in the lobby, and
I’ll tell my friend to leave.” He didn’t know it was a guy at first. He didn’t know it was a guy until he came during the day, one of the cheerleaders was in my room, and he was a well-known gay person. We were developing a relationship. But my roommate falsely told people we were having a sexual relationship, and we weren’t doing anything in my room. We dated for a period of time after that. He was just in my room because he didn’t want to go home, off-campus. He was hanging out. My roommate started living with his girlfriend more, which was fine with me (laughter). Then, he ran into some trouble with trying to pledge a fraternity. So, he started to step back on campus more. So, I would have nightly parties in my room. Everybody would come to my room. My best friend and his boyfriend would come over. We’d make nightly runs to Wal-Mart, come back to the room, and play cards. So, I had the room. Eventually, my roommate stayed, you know so I couldn’t do those things. We’d do different things. So, I was glad when I got my own room.

“I Knew I Liked Boys”

Zion remembered feeling same sex attraction as a child. He talked about playing doctor as a ten-year old with other little boys and girls. Although he dated girls throughout high school, he acknowledged pursuing relationships with girls in order to mask his gay identity.

There was an attraction there. I felt like this is what I should be doing. At the same time, I needed to keep a girlfriend, you know? You’re at the age when you should have a girl around. So, I had one for that purpose. I still hadn’t identified. I
was messing around with guys, but I had not necessarily identified, “Oh, this is what it is.”

As a teenager, Zion came out to himself as a gay man. He reflected on this major event, and recalled the lengths he went through to connect with the gay community. He laughed as though he could not believe his own actions. It was not long after coming out that Zion became involved in his first romantic relationship with a man.

We had gay pride in my hometown. I was 18. I had gotten my license. I got in my mother’s car. I was curious about gay pride, not exactly knowing if I was gay. I knew I liked boys. I had messed with boys. And this guy, I can still see him in my head; he was walking around downtown in my hometown. And, I literally followed him around the city in my car, and I came back, and he was gone. I was disappointed. I was like, “Oh, there’s something behind that.” I think a month later I went to a (gay) club for the first time. That’s when I really knew at that point in time. Because you know, I still had girlfriends. I had plenty of girlfriends. I had sexual relationships with girls up until that point. The first time I went to the club I met somebody, and he became my first boyfriend. So, we dated for a long period of time. So, it was weird like that. I guess I never really coped with the fact that I’d just come out.
“Each Coming Out is Important”

Coming out has been integral to Zion’s development as a Black gay man. He discussed the coming out process and examined the complexities that he had to consider while in college in making his decision about whether or not to disclose his orientation.

It’s very important. Each coming out experience has been very important. I’m still coming out to this day, at different levels with different people. Each coming out is important because it challenges the person that you come out to, to make a decision at that point. How are they going to react? How are they going to respond, not only at that moment, but later on when it counts? Are you still going to call? Are you still going to be around? Are you going be careful with what you say now or how you approach? Are we still going to laugh and joke the same way we used to laugh and joke? Are we going to care for each other the same way we used to care for each other? So, it challenges those individuals, and it challenges you in dealing with those situations. It’s important who you come out to also, and how you tell them. Do you come out on the telephone? Do you tell them in-person? Do you write a letter? I don’t think I tell people until they are prepared to receive it. And if they ask, then they are definitely prepared to receive it.
“I’m Honestly Gay”

While he did not walk around with a neon sign touting his sexual orientation, Zion was honest about his gay identity when questioned by others. When not on his own terms, he was not “big on disclosing” his orientation to others, primarily heterosexual students, in college.

I speak in general terms, “them, they” (when referring to other gay people) based on how close we were, what we were talking about. I don’t think I was openly gay, I’m honestly gay. If you ask me, I’m going to tell you. If you bold enough, and have the right to ask me, then I’m bold enough to tell you that, “Yes.” Why not? So, that’s how I became. I wasn’t the most masculine person, but I wasn’t the most feminine person. I was in-between. So, you questioned it, you weren’t for sure. But as the years progressed, you never seen me with a girl, and you seen me with more guys and never with girls. It became general knowledge, but never something that was questioned, or never something that was challenged.

“I’m Going to Love you Anyway, No Matter What”

Coming out to his mother facilitated Zion’s coming out to the rest of his family. He spoke about the reactions of family members to his coming out. Alongside coming out, he also told his family about his first boyfriend.

I came out to my mother at 18. My whole family knows. My family is fine with it completely. My sisters, both of them actually, are very supportive, particularly my younger sister. We have a deeper connection than my other sister and brother. But, my sisters were fine with it immediately. They knew, actually our family
knew the family of the guy who I initially started dating. We had a history several years ago. We used to hang out. I forgot about him when I was a younger child. So, our families knew each other. They were like, “Oh, we know your boyfriend.” That was easy. My brother was in the army at the time. When he first found out, he flipped. He was like, “This phase you about to go through, get out of it very quickly.” I was like, “It’s not a phase. This is what it is. This is who I am. I’ll see you when you get home.” He was over in the desert land at that point in time. But now, everyone is fine with it. Everyone is loving with it. My brother is very accepting of it. My nieces, they know. My mother, I keep wanting to discuss the topic of (gay) marriage with her to see how comfortable she is with it. But, she’s very comfortable with it. She’s met a lot of my friends who are gay, who have significant others. She’s very comfortable. She’s very loving. Her first statement when I said it was, “I’m going to love you anyway, no matter what.”

“Once you Tell Your Mother, Who Gives a Damn?”

Zion felt fortunate to come from a family who is accepting of his gay identity. He recalled a conversation that he had with his mother while in college. It was important for Zion that his mother took an interest in all facets of his life, including his romantic life. I do (feel comfortable going to my family). I do because I feel that my mother is loving. I remember my second semester of freshman year in college, I was dating a guy, and he was in my room, and I was writing a letter to my mom. He was like, “Tell her I said hi!” And I was like, “I will if you really want me to.” I wrote it in there. At the end of the year, she picked me up, and asked me, “How’s [identifies
person by name? Where is he?” I was like, “Oh, we don’t really talk anymore.” We didn’t get into detail, but she relates well to all my pasts (relationships), and to me telling her I’m dating someone, and what I’m doing. We don’t have deep discussions. I think that’s what hurts a lot folks, the fact that they have not told their mother. Someone else told me this a long time ago, “Once you tell your mother, who gives a damn?”

*The Power of Friendship*

Zion had a small, close-knit circle of friends while a student at an HBCU. No matter what, he could call on these individuals. Be it harassment, academic, or merely social, Zion credited his friendship circle for being his support unit when he needed someone to talk to when it came to gay issues, or just issues in general.

You have to have someone to talk to as it relates to all your issues, your gay issues. So, my best friends were the ones I turned to for support. Some of my best straight friends that were on campus, the ones I had identified myself to, I would call them, and we would have conversations as it relates to my sexuality. They were male (heterosexual friends). I don’t do females. I had one female friend who was my official escort to things that I would have to go to. She was my official escort, my dinner guest when we both had to have guests. She called me out one day in my junior year, maybe late during my sophomore year, she just called me out, “We know you’re gay. So, I’m going to have to be your official escort for wherever we go.” And I said, “Okay.” So she and I began to talk and had a good relationship and friendship as it relates to that and the things we did. So, I would
talk to her about some things but not a lot. I really don’t talk to females as it relates to my personal life. That’s just the way it’s always been.

“I Had my Gay Group of Friends”

Zion’s small pool of friends spanned from heterosexual to homosexual to academic. He spoke about coming out in these groups as well as being a member of these groups. Zion socialized with his openly gay friends behind closed doors. Because he was involved in various on-campus organizations, he felt that maintaining public friendships with other openly gay men on-campus could threaten his chances of being taken seriously as a student leader.

I had my gay group of friends, but we really didn’t socialize out in public. I was socially involved with my scholarship group. There were 20 of us. We went to summer camp together. We stayed in the same hall. I came out to my best friend in that group, actually said the words; and then to another friend within that group. Those are two of my best friends to this day, along with the other heterosexual friends that I have. We continue to communicate. I had friends and individuals that I met through my major. I was politically involved. I was a freshman class officer. All the people that were in the scholarship group were heterosexual, male and female. I don’t do a lot of female friends at all. Even today, I have one or two, and we’re not going to call and talk to each other too often. Some of my male friends are straight guys from school, whom I can call on to this day from the organization that we were in together.
Discriminating Tastes in Friendship

Elaborating on his friendships with other gay students, Zion reminisced on how he met other students who identified as homosexual. He also confronted his own internal homophobia as he interacted with other gay students on campus.

My first gay friend, we were having the first night of orientation. And I just went over and talked to him, and we had a conversation around some things. He gave me his room number, and we just continued to talk. I think I stopped by his room two or three days later, and we continued to talk. It just kept developing like that. And so, we just developed a friendship through that communication from the very first night. He was my very first gay friend in college, and we remained friends for a long period of time, up until the last year. Later on, he introduced me to another guy, and we became best friends throughout college. Not only that, I brought him under my wing with leadership. Actually my circle of gay friends is very small. I don’t associate with a lot of people, gay or not gay. I keep my circles very small. There are people that I consider close confidants. Of course, there were other gay people on campus that I would speak to throughout. I never disassociated myself, that’s just my character. I think I did avoid other people who were extremely feminine for various reasons: 1. Because I didn’t get to know them, and that’s my fault. 2. Because I limited myself from knowing them because they were fem, and I was at a place and doing different things; and I like to keep my circle small, so I didn’t associate with a lot of feminine guys or gay guys. As I become more liberated, I don’t focus on that, as much as the company I
keep, I want to make sure it’s good company. Their individual characteristics are their individual characteristics. I do want to make sure it’s good company. I am more cautious of the company I keep, I am. But that’s just part of the homophobia I have inside of me…the fem look; the drag queen; who do you hang out with? Who do you associate with? How do you know? You’re not going to walk into the school with me looking like that; you couldn’t be my long term lover because when I reach a certain point, I want to go out in social settings, and I need a person who looks and fits within those social settings. So, that’s homophobia, but it’s not me listening to her. It’s also about knowing what I need and knowing what social circles I want to get into.

“They Were Kind of Shocked That I Was so Easy About It”

Zion recalled challenges that he encountered with friends while coming out and becoming more aware of his sexual orientation. He also talked about the challenge of coming out to a childhood friend of his, and how this friend looked to Zion as a gay man.

My next-door neighbor went to the same school (college) as I did, and my neighbor who lived across the road. The next-door neighbor and the one who lived across the road were guys. We were out late one night, around midnight. This is when I first became comfortable with who I was. They asked the question, “Are you gay?” And I said, “Yeah.” They were kind of shocked that I was so easy about it. And they said, “So, what should we tell people when you get there (to college)?” I told them, “You tell them to ask me (laughter).” If you’re going to hang out with me, you just tell them to ask me what’s going on, or what’s up.” I
said, “Why, do you have questions about it, are you concerned about it, what’s going on?” And they said, “No, you’re going to be down there, people are going to be asking, how should we address it? People are already asking, people from high school and the community.” I said, “Just send them to me, and I’ll address them individually as I need to address them around that.” I used to play doctor with one of them as a child. Not only that, last year he called me and was like, “You know, I have to tell you something.” I don’t know if he actually said, “I’m gay.” I don’t know if he actually used those words. But he said he was messing around with guys now full-time. I told him I pretty much knew that the whole time. He told me, “I wish I was liberated back then when we were having that conversation in the tent because if I was, I would probably have a much better life.” He ended up flunking out of school, trying to do different things; trying to find acceptance of people. And then, he just had a hard time for the next couple of years of his life, for maybe five or six years. He told me, “You had a confidence at that time that I didn’t have. I don’t know what it was because I knew back then. But I wasn’t comfortable enough to say it. I don’t know how you got comfortable at that point.” And I told him, “I told my mother.” There was nobody else I had to hide from, or do anything for because the provider of my life knew, and she was okay with it. So, I didn’t need to get anyone else’s permission. And his mother found out. She was still dealing with it. That’s why he was becoming more comfortable with it. But he still wasn’t there. He was praying on it, that God
would just communicate, and that he would feel more secure and that this (being gay) is okay and acceptable.

“Yes. Next Question”

Zion became a student leader. He held various offices while in college including student government vice-president, and senior body president. He also served as a member of his scholarship group for all four years, and president of a few major student organizations. Zion also decided to join a fraternity. He recounted a situation in which he was invited to join a very distinctive and prestigious fraternity.

I was invited to pledge [names the fraternity]. I really didn’t want to go, I was invited to pledge. All of my scholarship friends wanted to pledge this fraternity. So, they wanted all of us. We were the elite group of the university. We maintained high gpas; had all the leadership ability. At that point in time I was the president of [names major organization]. So, they invited me to come out. So my good friend said, “They’re going to ask you the question. They just ask everyone, “Are you gay? Or, there are rumors that you are gay on campus. How do you respond to that?” This particular chapter…a lot of their brothers was undercover (closeted gay men). And I looked at them, we were in a large classroom, and all of them were in the classroom, and all of them were in there spread out, and I was fielding questions left and right, and I forgot who asked the question, but I don’t think he was gay. Of the 30 members they had in there, 10 of them I knew were definitely gay, either by knowing someone directly that they had messed with, or had encountered them in some way or form that knew they were. So, they asked
the question ("Are you gay?")", and I said, "Yes, next question." So, that was a
demanding moment in my life. I was a sophomore at that time. The vice-

president of the fraternity came to my room, and we hadn’t talked all year. Like,
we would walk by each other without speaking all that year. And he came and he
said, "I never thought that you would say that. You didn’t have to say it.” I said,
“I did have to say it. I had to say it for me. It was important that I said it at that
moment, in that setting for me. It was important.” And other people would say,
“You had everything else, why would you say that? Because, I wouldn’t have told
them, or I just wouldn’t have said anything.” And I’d say, “I know. I had to say it
for me.” That was a crossing point. That was a lot of coming out at that moment
with those individuals. They were highly pissed after I had left, that I just came in
and told them like that, and said, “Yes, next question,” ’cause their face was like,
(makes shocking expression). They gave me about two more questions, and then I
left after that.

Zion ended up pledging a different fraternity, which is the fraternity that he wanted to
pledge. The previous fraternity was known for attracting the cream of the crop as “they
had all the leadership positions,” and this is where a student like Zion was “supposed” to
be. However, Zion wanted to be with another fraternity, and during his senior year, he
was accepted into that fraternity. Some of his fraternity brothers attempted to make an
issue of Zion’s being gay. Zion recalled members of his fraternity who came to his
defense. He smiled as he talked about a particular moment in which he and one of his
fraternity brothers became friends on a deeper level.
One of the (fraternity) brothers said (to my line brother who helped me cross into the fraternity), “What are you going to do about your frat brother being gay (referring to Zion)? I know Zion is a little fem and off a bit, but, you don’t know your line brother is gay?” My line brother said, “What are you talking about? I never even thought about it like that.” And maybe later on in that summer, it was funny, we were going to a frat event, and we were having a conversation about going out, and hanging out. So, he (my line brother) mentions going out to a gay club. I’m like, “Oh, okay.” He was like, “You know, why don’t we go out there one day?” And I was like, “Yeah, that would be cool.” Then, later we had a conversation about it. He said, “They (the other fraternity brothers) had mentioned about you being gay. I didn’t think about it. It didn’t bother me.” Then he talked about our fellowship and love for one another. So, he said it, and another frat brother said it, and it was good. It was a good experience.

“You Can’t Beat the Whole World up for Saying a Name”

Zion was a victim of sexual harassment based upon his sexual orientation. He spoke about the harassment nonchalantly. He also talked about witnessing others’ sexual harassment based upon their sexual orientation.

Name calling all the time. Name calling was a part of it. I was in the public light at school, so name-calling was very much so rampant. “Fag. Faggot.” Prank calls were a part of it. Never physical. I think anybody knows me knows that I don’t mind if you want to get physical, if we’re at that point. It’s not my first option, but I’m not going to step back from it. But, name-calling was a part of it. So, I don’t
know who the culprit was or how I addressed it. Was it disappointing at times?
Sure. Name-calling. I think wherever I would have gone at the time, I would have
had name-calling. I never responded. It would be a person I was with who called
someone a name. Or, a group that I was with at that time that called someone a
name. So, I didn’t address it. It probably would have been the same issue how I
received the name calling, in passing by some stupid fool walking around. Those
types of comments, it wasn’t something I could really address. My freshman year
when I got to school, there was a guy on campus; he had been there a couple of
years before I’d gotten there. I recall them saying that he got physical with some
heterosexuals on campus for whatever reason. I don’t know why. He was one of
the people I avoided. I had just gotten to campus, I didn’t know anybody. And one
of the guys told me to just avoid him. And so, I avoided him. I do recall them
saying that he had gotten into an altercation with straight guys on campus.
You can’t beat the whole world up for saying a name. You can’t educate the
whole world. You do it one person at a time in most cases. So, you just ignore it,
don’t let it consume you. You have your circle of friends so that you can deal with
those things when they come up and you can talk about it together. But no, you
don’t go beat up someone every time they call you a faggot or a punk.
“I Was Shocked and Surprised to Hear Him Say That”

Zion’s decision to come out impacted some of his college relationships. He recounted challenges that he encountered with a heterosexual male friend.

Generally, I’ve had very positive experiences. I find myself fortunate that I have a very supportive family, supportive friends be it heterosexual or homosexual, job environment that is supportive, and we have good relationships, good working relationships. I do recall one bad experience because they responded negatively. We were on the bus traveling for something. He bumped into me, and kind of pushed off, and made a negative comment. I can’t really recall what he said, but I was hurt by it. I wrote him a letter because we were close. I said, “I was surprised to hear you say that. It was hurtful to hear you say that.” I don’t know what was said, it was kind of a push off, like “Ugh, get off of me.” And it was not like that. He fell on me. So, I told him that it was inappropriate and that I was shocked and surprised to hear him say that. I was hurt by it. He wrote me back, saying that he was sorry that he hurt me; that that was not his intention. We had a conversation around our letters, how those images that you put out are harmful to individuals, and that you have to be careful with what you say. We remained friends. This was freshman year of college.

“She Just Wanted Me To Be Careful”

He also talked about the advice that a staff member gave to him regarding the type of people he should be associating with on campus.
My junior year of college, one of my friends that I was dating came to visit, very fem guy, not flamboyant, but fem. Fem enough to know that when you looked at him…model, had that type of look. We were in charge of the summer camp this year for the scholarship kids, the same summer camp that I was a part of. And, he and I were asleep in my room together. We got up, and walked to get something to eat from the campus pit. Campus is dead. No one is really there during the summer. My scholarship advisor had seen me with him, and I didn’t know she had seen me with him. We were just going to the pit to get something to eat. It was closed, so we came back. But the next day, my advisor called me to her office. She said, “Zion, when we go to conferences and other trips, I never ask you to do anything or go anywhere. I don’t ask you who comes to your room. That’s not my concern. But you need to be careful with who you flaunt around this campus. As you move up in leadership positions and do different things, you need to be extremely careful about who you associate with on campus.” I said, “What are you talking about?” She said, “You know exactly what I am talking about…with whom you were walking that day.” Who saw me? Nobody saw me. I really didn’t see anyone around me. It was really funny. So, that was a funny experience. She was like, “I love you like a mother.” And, she did. She just wanted me to be careful because I had gone from being president of the [identifies organization] to being vice-president of [identifies organization]. So, that’s the level I was at during that point in time. So, she was just like, “As you move up, you want to be careful about what you do.”
Issues as a Fraternity Member

Zion’s fraternity also expressed an interest in the friendships and company that he kept outside of the fraternity. The fraternity took issue with Zion being seen around campus with openly gay students, or students who were perceived to be gay. Although Zion had a strictly professional relationship with another gay student leader on campus, Zion felt pressured by his fraternity to clarify the nature of that relationship.

I kept association with him (another gay student leader)...because we were just so similar, wonderful conversations, intellectual, wonderful friendship all the way around. He’s a fem individual, but he had wonderful leadership qualities, and we brought him in (as my assistant) for his leadership ability and the things that he did. When I later joined my fraternity, they had issues with it. I remember them coming up to me and saying, “You need to disassociate yourself from him during this period of time.” The fraternity knew without asking. So they asked me, and I did let them know he was working for me. He was my assistant, and that we were going to be around each other because he was working for me. Falsely, it had been put out there that we had a different type of relationship. I made sure to correct that. That’s not the kind of relationship we had. We had a great relationship.

“I Didn’t get in and Push it as Much as I Could”

Zion moved up as a leader on campus and became more cautious about what he did. When asked if his campus had an LGBT student group, he discussed the lack of such
a group on campus. He further discussed his partial responsibility for the invisibility of the group as he was not supportive of it.

LGBT students, no we didn’t have a group. My junior year, there was some talks of that happening. My senior year, I was the president (of a major organization), and there was some talks about it. My student organization advisor mentioned to me, she said, “I just want you to know that this is probably going to come up. There is a group trying to form a GLBT group.” I said, “Good, that sounds good,” trying to be very diplomatic. She was looking for a good advisor for the group. We had identified someone who was sensitive to it, but that advisor transferred and went to another school. So, that slowed things down a bit. They had to go through a process to get accepted on campus, a student senate process. I said, “When it gets to me and my desk, I have no problem signing off on it. But, it still has to go through the process. I don’t know how much support I’ll give it as it goes through its process, being gay (being a gay student organization).” And that’s one thing that I look back and I really regret that I didn’t get in and push it as much as I could. It had gotten to my vice-president at the time, a straightest of straight, and very heterosexual that I was supporting them. We were in an executive meeting, and he goes, “What’s this we hear about you supporting this gay group on campus?” I said, “First, it’s an LGBT group, alliance group that’s trying to come on campus, so say it correctly. They are trying to go through the senate process; and if they do get through the senate process, I will sign off on it. But I’m not supporting it, and they are still going through a senate process right
now. So whatever rumors are out there about me supporting it or whatever I’m doing, that’s not the case. So, we’ll wait until the process goes through and when it gets to my desk, I’ll look at it and evaluate it at that time.” You could say well, why didn’t you or your assistant help their whole group because you could have did it very quickly, and pushed it through quickly. That wasn’t my agenda at the time. I just think there was a lot of mess behind the group with the organizers. Because it was a gay group, there was some hesitation behind it. I didn’t want to be considered the gay president at that time. I was already a gay president, but I didn’t want my whole agenda to end up being focused and not receive any other support because now I am the gay president who is trying to throw gay issues down in front of the student body.

“I Had Already Done my one Gay Thing”

Zion reconciled his lack of actively supporting an LGBT organization on campus by highlighting his support of a prominent Black author, who once visited the campus as a keynote speaker, but received an un-accepting and hostile reception from students due to his being homosexual. This incident happened prior to Zion’s arrival onto campus as a student. Nonetheless, he felt it was important to repair the relationship between the author and the institution.

I had already done my one gay thing. I brought [named author] back to our campus. He had vowed at one point in time not to come back to our campus.

When he first came, they booed and criticized. That happened to [named author] on my campus way before I’d gotten there, maybe 4 years (before), and he vowed
not to come to our campus. So, when I heard that summer, I did everything I could to get him to come back. He came back in February that year. He was received wonderfully. The crowd was limited. Anyone was welcomed, but we didn’t promote it as much as we would have done with another artist. So, only those people who really wanted to see [named author] came in this case. Last time it was required that all students come. That wasn’t part of the requirement. He was well received. He did a really good job. We wrote him a letter telling him how much we wanted him to come back and be a part of the university. He was very happy to come back. So, that was my one big gay thing as the president. I didn’t want my whole agenda to be consumed by getting a gay organization when I had already did a controversial thing to the straight organizations that they were upset with me about.

“As Long as It’s Not Said, It’s Okay”

Zion reflected on his experiences as a Black gay man in various settings. He discussed his experience switching his behavior in order to fit the norms required by a specific community.

Any group that we go into, we put on a mask for that period of time. We adjust our behavior to that group. It’s not necessarily being fake or not being yourself, but we adjust the behavior to that group to be sure that’s an acceptable behavior. Whether we’re going into a boardroom, or we’re going into a kitchen, or the club, we adjust the behavior depending on the group. I would adjust as I entered with the fraternity, how I spoke in the office at school, or how I spoke with my friends
at nighttime as we “kee kee’d (joked)” around the card table. That language was different. It’s different than how I spoke in the classroom. To put on the mask as in don’t say what you are. You just live. It’s like, going to church as a child. You go to the church, and everyone knows the musician is gay. But the musician better not ever say he’s gay out loud. He should never say it to the entire church. Even if the entire church knows the choir director is gay. If he says it, that eliminates him, and puts him in a completely different light to the members of the church. He loses his status, his prominence to the members of the church even though it’s known. And that’s how you operate in any Black setting that’s predominantly straight. Where you can go in, you can sit down, you can fellowship with them, but you better not say it. As long as it’s not said, although it may be known or unknown, it’s okay.

“If you Sit There and Take a Part of It, You’re Just Harming the Movement”

When asked how it feels to walk into a room in which it is okay to “fellowship,” but not okay to disclose his sexual orientation, Zion paused for a moment. It was as though he was placing himself into that specific environment. He thoughtfully responded.

You would like to say that you could look at it like I’m straight. Do straight people have to say, “I’m straight” all the time? It’s just normally assumed. I don’t assume that most people think I’m gay because when they do, they adjust. It’s like when White people are all in a room, and an African American enters the room, and then they adjust their language to make sure they are sensitive to that culture or area. I find it funny because in my graduate program, one of the girls in my
classes, she’s just not sensitive to homosexuals. She just doesn’t have the language as it relates to how you speak in reference to it. Her language has not been appropriate at any point. And, I have not necessarily come out and said, “I’m gay girl, you need to watch your language and say the right thing as we go through this.” But I do say, “That’s not how you say it. This is not how you address those issues. This is not what policy says about this issue. Let’s stick around the issues. Let’s say it correctly. Let’s address it correctly. This is what policy says as it relates to education and law. This is the current trend as it relates to kids who identify as LGBT. So we need to be sensitive within that area, how we address it, how we say things related to it.” So I say those things without saying I’m gay. Probably my first year of college, starting my sophomore year of college, I probably would have sat in a room and said what they were saying, and not address, without trying to bring attention to myself. So, I’ve tried to do that more to address it. Because if you sit there and take a part of it, you’re just harming the movement yourself.

“It’s an Abomination”

Zion identified religion as being a component that keeps the Black community from completely accepting homosexuality.

It depends from what teachings and what perspectives they look at religion and how it applies to their life. But yeah, it’s definitely something that keeps…if you read the Bible and just read the words, and if you’re a religious person, then you’re going to see that text, and you’re going to read that one text that talks
about that. And, no matter what all other texts say, you’re looking at those words that say, “An abomination.” You don’t need anything else. It don’t matter what came before it, what came after, you just need that one part. They’ll say, “Well, the God that I serve says it’s an abomination.” But when you go into it further, and you look at the message of love that’s throughout the Bible, the message of redemption, and saving, and you see the greater message that’s in those words, and you look at the scripture and how that text was written, what was really being said about an abomination, and how everything was called an abomination at that time. All acts, particularly in Leviticus, most acts were called an abomination, discussing homosexuality in the context of worshipping another god, and not worshipping Jesus Christ and the God that we serve. And so, when we look at it from those contexts, and we can explain it to a person who sees it in that way, or they have a teacher who can explain it to them in that way, then they can break those chains that bind them as it relates to the religion having a hold on the community and their outlook on what they can see or what they can do.

“It’s Just Breaking Down the Stereotypes”

Zion elaborated on his discussion of the Black community and how homosexuality is perceived. He identified the Black community as being “more homophobic,” attributing this viewpoint to the pervasiveness of masculinity of Black men in the Black community.

We were taught to be “men” in the Black community. Then, we’re criticized because there is a lack of Black men in the community. So all of that is a part of
it, and, the perception of it. The only perceptions that they have out there of Black gay men are the half dressers, or those snapping their fingers, or the cross-dressers. Those are the only perceptions they have whereas, White America doesn’t have those as their perceptions. Their main perception is the boy next door. So with them, they see their child, or their former child. In the Black community, they don’t even want to think that’s their child. Or, if it was, it’s no longer their child because you’ve changed. We had *Noah’s Arc* (the first cable television show that focused on the lives and friendships of four Black gay men). I love *Noah’s Arc*. I still wonder why they took it off (the air) because those were, they were slightly positive, but they were real images. You had the whole spectrum of being Black and gay. You had all of that within the one show. It’s just breaking down the stereotypes. The more and more that we get individuals who represent the entire spectrum of gay and being gay, the more the Black community will accept it. Then and only then will we get acceptance from the Black community.

“*You Need to Represent the Whole Spectrum of Black Gay Men*”

Zion pinpointed the media as taking part in projecting and perpetuating certain images of Black gay men that are usually overly effeminate and extremely flamboyant. According to Zion, these images serve to reproduce homophobia in the Black community.

It’s very evident and pronounced, and it’s repeated over media constantly. No matter what type of conversation you’re having about homosexuality over radio
media, over television, it’s always evident. No matter how accepting they say they are, they always use a stereotypical analysis of a homosexual. So, that’s disappointing. It supports homophobia. It doesn’t eliminate it. And that’s why it’s also disappointing to hear them kind of talk positive, but using bad examples. I listen to [identifies a Black radio host] sometimes, and he’s terrible with it the way he says he’s very accepting, and wants to talk about it, but he uses stereotypical images or statements, such as: the hairstylist, ‘Miss thang,’ as he goes into his conversation about it. So, it’s not healthy, and it’s not good for the Black community. I call the example of [identifies another Black radio host’s morning show]. He has a gay morning guy who talks in a high-pitched voice, smacks every time he says something. [Identifies another Black radio host] has the same type of person on his radio show. So, those are not good models for Black gay men because that’s what everyone has in their heads. It’s a stereotype. That hurts the positive Black gay male who wants to do something positive in the community. You need to represent the whole spectrum of Black gay men. We must show all, and what happens is that we don’t showcase all. Because those who are on the more masculine side of Black gay, do not want to be shown in public viewing, which is disappointing. They don’t want to be upfront with it, and saying, “This is who I am, and I love another Black male.” I’m sure there are NFL or NBA players who can say it at this point, even CEOs who can say it at this point. If we were an accepting community, they would say it easily, but we’re not. We need those people to say it in order to become an accepted community.
Homophobia in the Mainstream Media

Comparing homophobia in mainstream White society to that in the Black community, Zion turned again to the media to make his point. His poignant examples further support his position that the media contributes to how society views and reacts to homosexuality. According to Zion, the manifestation of homophobia looks different, but it exists in the White community although “White folks are more accepting of homosexuality than Black folks as it relates to homosexuality.”

There is less (homophobia in mainstream White society), and the way it’s perceived is also differently. The [names major organization for Black people], their magazine recently had an article about how [names popular talk show host] interviewed [names Black and White male celebrities who later came out as gay men while in romantic relationships with women]. The television personality invited the (White male celebrity) onto the couch and very casually talked about his former relationship with his wife, his secret relationship with his (gay) lover, without ever saying anything about being on the down-low (DL). But, when the television personality hosted (the Black male celebrities), they were grilled about the DL culture and how it’s detrimental to the Black community. When actually, what they are doing is the exact same thing (as the White male celebrity). So, when you look at how (the talk show host) treated the White male versus the Black males, that tells you there’s a major difference in how we (Black people) look at it (homosexuality), and how mainstream media looks at Black gayness and White gayness. Because both of them are gay, or all three of them are gay, rather.
DL is in both communities. It’s not limited to just to one particular group of people. It crosses all communities.

“I Just Don’t Mix Well in White Gay Culture.”

While Zion views mainstream society as being more accepting of homosexuality, he does not identify heavily with mainstream gay culture. He supports mainstream gay organizations, such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). He limits his communication with mainstream culture, both heterosexual and homosexual though.

I just don’t tend to mix well in White gay culture. I’ve been intentioned, when I do associate myself, but it’s not something that I tend to take advantage of. I’m just not attracted in any form. Not attracted to the music. Not attracted to the culture. Not attracted to the people. I like my men dark (laughter). That just doesn’t attract me. In working with the HRC, I’ve volunteered with them a couple of times, and it was a very healthy relationship I built with them. Most of the members are mainstream, White, affluent, liberal HRC members. That was a good working relationship, but it also confirmed to me that this is not something I’d like to do. I want to help in my community because I know my community needs it more than their community. What they’re doing for gays as a whole is important, and that’s why I support the things that they do. But on a micro level as well as the local level, I need to support more Black communities. They are reaching out to HBCUs to have a conference every year. They are trying to make sure to have it two times a year. Just working with HBCUs to get them to provide more campus organizations for gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual
individuals. They are working on it. I participated two years ago with the schools in my state to get them affiliated with the HRC.

“I Know That my Relationship With God and Jesus Christ is Real”

Zion attributed finding spirituality and religiosity as being important to his development as a Black gay man. He spoke about the complexities of his religious/spiritual journey as he was raised in a religion that casts homosexuality as a sin. It was not until he began to explore religion and spirituality for himself, and joined a gay affirming church, that he discovered that his being a gay is not a sin.

In college it was different. It was difficult. I wasn’t completely at rest with my spiritual side. Coming out of high school, I was agnostic. I believed there was a God up there, but I didn’t know how he identified or related to me, or what religion was correct. Being Christian-raised, but not completely religious, I’m more so from a spiritual family. So going into college, I sought out churches, and started to attend churches, but never did on a regular basis. So, I would research and listen, and was very in the middle of the road as it relates to religion and spirituality. It grew deeper as I went into my later years of college. It kind of got complicated during my senior year. One of the major reverends in the community started dating one of my friends. My other best friend was dating a bishop at a major church. I went to that church, and it was kind of weird. I was at a different place in how I perceived religion and what you should say about religion and being a Reverend and being gay. If you asked me four years ago, that’s how I looked at it. If you ask me today, I look at it completely different. Four years ago,
it wasn’t a possibility (being gay and religious). I didn’t think you were damned and going to hell for being gay. I did think you were committing a sin for acting on your feelings. So, I thought that was sinful, particularly with the clergy. How could they justify what they were doing with who they were? So, I didn’t wash my body every time I had sex with a guy or run and cleanse myself, but I knew religion played a part in what I was doing. Today, I attend a gay affirming church. In my research and examination of the Bible for myself, and the teachings that I received from my pastor, we preach a message of love and self-love, and we preach a message that the Bible lends itself to interpretation. And that as you read the Bible, you should read scripture and the context that it’s in, and the time frame that it was written in; and that love still exists and that God does not create things, or a person to have love and for that love not to mean something and not to be real. And so, we have to look at it in those contexts. So, when I look at it and examine from that perspective, I know that my relationship with God and Jesus Christ is real and how I feel about religion is completely different than how I felt about it then. Four years ago, I wouldn’t have even discussed that. I understand that I was being protective and covered at that time, but it’s not something I would have discussed with other people. But I understand that my outlook is completely different.
It Was Truly Politics

Reflecting on his biggest challenges as a Black gay male at an HBCU, Zion once again highlighted his regret for not establishing an LGBT group on campus during his tenure at his HBCU.

I do regret that I wasn’t educated as much in addressing gay issues. That came later on in life, how I was able to address gay issues. I agree with the HRC’s effort in doing work around the HBCUs because that wasn’t there when I first graduated. We were in our own world, very independent from everyone else. So, we represented the community at large, but we were very separated from the world. I think were I at an HBCU or a traditional White college, I probably would have been similar as it relates to who I associated with, the number of people I associated with. I might have gotten involved if there was an LGBT group established at the time, I might have associated myself more with that. But because it was not established, I was not going to associate or try to figure out how to help them establish at that point in time. It was a political decision. It wasn’t an emotional or a social decision. It was truly political. I’m a politician by trade (laughter).

The HBCU as a Rewarding Experience

Zion smiled as he described the many rewards as a being both a student and graduate of an HBCU. He accomplished a great amount as he not only excelled academically, but he also excelled as a student leader.
I think being Black and not identified as gay, or not saying I was gay, but general knowledge was there for most of the student body, and still being successful. I think that’s one of the biggest rewards that I have, that students didn’t judge me. When they cast their votes, they cast their votes for the person, and not the (gay) issues I had behind me. So, they supported and believed in the things that I did regardless of the outside comments that occurred. They still believed in me. I loved what I was able to do at an HBCU that helped students, not necessarily gay students or straight students; my issue was helping the students and the university. So, the students who did see me as gay, they knew that I was still doing something to help them. So, those were some of the success stories that I truly love. And the message that I pass onto people is that when you start doing it for yourself, and not the students that you are serving, then you need to stop doing it. And, I took that lesson throughout my life. That is the message I got from an HBCU, that we serve the community in which we exist. In most cases that’s an urban community, in some cases, a rural community, a Black community. We serve the community in which we live, and we impact and do some positive work in that community.
“Their Message Has to be Accepting and Diverse”

A message that is “accepting and diverse” was at the forefront as Zion discussed his thoughts on ways in which HBCUs can become more supportive and accepting of the gay student population.

I don’t know if it’s the HBCU. The president of a particular HBCU in the South, is very supportive. They have a LGBT group. I know some of the girls have come to our church a couple of times. And they speak about how much the president supports their group, and how that message has translated to everyone within the campus about the president’s support for that group. That type of support has to go throughout all HBCUs, where the president says, “This is important to me, and because it is an important issue for me, anybody who works for me, or anybody who attends this university needs to understand that this is important that we embrace this group, and we accept them; that harassment of any type is not acceptable on my campus, be it racial, sexual orientation, no form of harassment is accepted on my campus and all will be treated with the same amount of punishment and consequences.”
Zion felt that support and acceptance at HBCUs may also depend on the type of institution. For example, the mission of acceptance of gay students may be administered in certain ways depending on the HBCU, be it at an all female college, versus at a co-ed campus, versus at an all male college.

(At an all male school), they would very much so have challenges in that environment and the tradition that’s associated with them. We have to get out the image…this is educating the Black community and not just HBCUs because that’s where we draw our students. We have to get out into the community that being Black and gay does not equate to being female or being feminine, or having the desire to be a female. Once we get that message out there, you can be Black, gay, and successful. You can be Black and gay, and still be Black and proud. You can be Black and gay and do construction work. Be an engineer. It doesn’t mean that I have to be a designer; that I have to be a teacher; or perform in one of the arts because I am Black and gay. If we can get that message out, that you can be Black, gay, and a doctor; Black, gay, and successful; Black, gay, and a very masculine male; we have to get that message first out to the community, get that in the church, get that in the community center. We do that still by having people who have been accepted in the mainstream community, but have not identified as gay. Come out. So, that’s the first part of it.
Reaching Back Into the Community

Zion offered words of advice for Black gay students who would like to attend an HBCU. He became alive with enthusiasm as he openly and unabashedly endorsed his HBCU. As such, Zion puts into practice the notion of reaching back into the community to bring another along.

I’ll give them advice that my mentor gave me when I went to college. He graduated from my HBCU, and he told me, “Make sure you go down there to get your M.S., and not your M.R.S. (laughter).” Make sure you go down there, focus on what you’re supposed to be doing, have a good time.” From my experience, I’d say to identify a small group of support people that you can work with, and work with that group. Stay on campus, and get yourself involved with student organizations in which you can find worth and wealth. Find a cause and become a part of it, whether it’s gay, Black, environmental, find a cause and do that cause well. Don’t give up. Call home, and listen to momma. That’s what I would tell kids who want to come to an HBCU. I tell them all the time, it’s the best experience you can have. I tell my nephew all the time, “You can go where you want to go; my money is going to my HBCU. Now if you want to meet my money, you can go down there with it (laughter).” I would prefer that he goes to an HBCU. I just feel like it’s a training ground. I take nothing from traditional White colleges. The research shows that those who attend HBCUs do well and do better, and receive graduate degrees and doctoral degrees after completing undergraduate programs. The research supports that. So, because of that, I will
veer a student to an HBCU. In veering them there, I’m going to push them to my alma mater. I do support all HBCUs, and the ones I have knowledge about. I tell a friend, I can get you into my HBCU. I can get you some money too if you want to go. Now, it’s in a small town. There’s nothing in that town. But, I can get you in there, and I can get you into some schools in this state. I still have contacts with the former presidents that I served with, who still have contacts within the schools.

Self Reflective Profile: N’diol

Currently residing in a large, metropolitan city on the East coast, I made the journey to interview N’diol during a very beautiful, spring weekend. N’diol identifies as a “Black American” gay male. He is a graduate of an HBCU located in the South. When he arrived for our first interview, my first impression of him was “artist,” or “thinker.” I thought artist based upon his appearance. He had long dreadlocks, which were pulled back, and revealed his intense dark brown eyes. It was the latter, along with his serious demeanor that gave me the impression of N’diol as a “thinker.” I would learn later that my presuppositions were accurate. N’diol is medium-to-dark complexioned, with facial hair, and he was personable, albeit a bit nervous initially.

I interviewed N’diol, and he brought a friend with him to our first interview for moral support. N’diol’s friend, Kristopher, was clean-cut, medium-brown complexioned, tall, and friendly. N’diol arrived alone for our second interview, as we established a rapport during the first interview, and he felt comfortable being alone with me.
“But Daddy, Momma Loves You”

Born and raised in a large city located in The Southwest, N’diol is the youngest of three siblings. He grew up in a two-parent household until his parents divorced during his childhood.

I grew up with my mom. My parents divorced when I was maybe five years old. And I spent from maybe five to eleven years of age trying to get them back together. I was always like, “But daddy, momma loves you. But momma, daddy loves you.” And then when I hit about twelve years old, I realized that even I wouldn’t live with those people if they lived in the same house. So, I kind of, you know, let that go. So, I grew up with my mom. I spent the summers with my dad, along with some holidays. So, I grew up with my sister and my brother. My sister is ten years older than me. My brother is one and a half years older than me. So, we grew up together. And, my grandparents, my mother’s parents lived around us too.

“I Grew up in a Very Nurturing Family”

As he recalled vivid and memorable moments from his childhood, N’diol’s face warmed up and a pleasant smile overcame the serious expression upon his face previously.

I remember. I grew up in a very nurturing family. My dad’s side and my mom’s side were very, very nurturing. We say I love you when you’re going to school in the morning. They were very encouraging. I was encouraged particularly by my mother and my grandparents on my mother’s side to do what made me happy;
whatever I wanted to do. So, they never, they didn’t chastise me, or force me to do anything that I didn’t want to do, you know that I wasn’t interested in. My grandparents on my mom’s side, I never saw them argue. I don’t remember any disagreements. If they did, I don’t remember.

_A Little Help From Grandparents_

Raised primarily by a single parent, N’diol remembered seeing his mother work hard in order to maintain a home for him and his siblings. He also recalled the presence of his maternal grandparents, who provided supplemental support.

My mom had like three jobs. She was a teacher. She actually worked with children with behavioral problems. She worked three jobs, and we didn’t really have a lot of money. But, we really did not know that because we had my grandparents. My grandparents had the antique furniture. My grandmother would wear her mink. Every time we would ask for money, they would give it to us. They would take us shopping. We would go to their house and raid the refrigerator, you know so, we did not know. I guess we kind of felt that when it came to our own house, we did not have any groceries there; or going shopping for school clothes, my grandparents would take us. My mom would take us to discount places. So we did not have too much money.

_Black Neighborhood, White School_

According to N’diol, his hometown neighborhood consisted of all Black people; everything surrounding it was predominantly White. This dynamic also played out in the schools N’diol attended.
My neighborhood was interesting. So, it was this neighborhood that was built for Black people, but everything around it was White folks. You know, versus the other one that was built on the other side of the tracks. My neighborhood, my mother grew up there ever since she was a kid, and then, we grew up there. And so, by time they integrated schools, my mother was in high school. They took them to high schools in the suburbs, because they were not going to send all those Black kids to the same high school. When I was growing up, by time I was in junior high and high school, they split the neighborhood up depending on the street you lived. That determined where you went to high school, and junior high school. So, I lived in a Black neighborhood, but I went to a school where I was the only Black student in my class.

“I Just Knew I Wanted to Go to an HBCU”

N’diol completed a bachelor’s degree at a private HBCU located in the South. He lived on-campus, in a residence hall for all 4 years until he graduated. N’diol highlighted why he chose to attend an HBCU.

I chose to attend an HBCU for a lot of reasons. First of all, I grew up and my mother taught us about Black history. Like, we got it at home because we damn sure wasn’t getting it at school. I was just always really proud of my heritage. And we would all go to the Grambling versus Prairie View game all the time, and it was just being around all of those Black folks you know, who were in college. And I wanted to be a drum major at the time because I thought drum majors were really cool. And I thought, well, if I’m not going to be a drum major, I at least
want to be in the band. My sister went to Howard, so she went to an HBCU. I have a cousin who went to Grambling. I wasn’t really that close to him. So, my mom had all these Black college flags around the house. I just knew I wanted to go to an HBCU. I mean, I grew up around Black folks, but I went to school with White people. I wasn’t really getting the type of education I wanted in terms of history. And I love Black people. I wanted to be around educated Black people. I knew that I would be going to a place where I would meet, because I knew the types of students they attracted, I knew that I was going to be in a place where I would meet people who were like me. They were Black, but they didn’t necessarily fit into the confines of what mainstream was saying Black was. So, that’s how I ended up where I ended up.

“I Knew it Was a Homophobic Atmosphere”

N’diol took several moments to collect and organize his thoughts as he reflected on his biggest challenges as a Black gay man at an HBCU.

On the one hand I feel like it would have been the same anywhere for me. I think that…I know that Black folks can be very judgmental when it comes to that (homosexuality), but I also know that a lot of Black folks, people in general, identify on some level, whether they admit it, have had some same sex experience; or, who identify as being gay or bisexual or whatever. The only thing that’s different about me is that I’m pretty okay with it. I feel like Black folks can be very judgmental when it comes to that, so I think it makes it a little more difficult to tell Black people or to be so-called “masculine,” and be gay because
that’s not what they expect. I just don’t feel like…I don’t think in my life I’ve
given people enough credit, because every heterosexual person, except the guy I
was telling you about the other day, and the friend who thought that we were
going to get married who when I told her, her mouth dropped; other than those
two, every heterosexual person that I’ve told have been okay with it. So, I don’t
think I’ve given Black people enough credit. Or, people in general, but
particularly, Black people. And I think that that’s most of us, because we let
situations and experiences with a few people, we let that I guess sort of obstruct
our view of how people would respond to it, I guess. Then again, some people
really do have really bad experiences. I learned that I didn’t give people enough
credit. I didn’t feel like, “Oh, I was gay bashed, or I feel uncomfortable,” because
I didn’t feel uncomfortable. The only thing that made me feel uncomfortable is
that I never really felt like I could talk about my experiences like other people
could.

Witnessing Abuse of Gay Students

N’diol experienced minimal levels of sexual harassment based upon his
orientation. Rather, he was witness to the sexual harassment of other gay students on
campus. He reflected on various instances of severe verbal sexual harassment of gay male
students that he witnessed on campus.

I remember one time, this guy, he was a work-study student in the financial aid
office, and, it was a group of us; it was set up this way. He was explaining the
process for us, like how to fill out financial aid papers or something. And I guess
this other student was getting frustrated or annoyed and he called this guy a faggot. And he was like, “Fuck you, faggot” or something like that. And they began to go back and forth. And the guy was like, “Fuck you, faggot.” And, the guy ripped up his papers. So yeah, I saw that and I was like, “Whoa.” I can remember being around people, so-called heterosexual folks, and somebody gay or really effeminate would walk by, and they may say something under their breath, like “Fucking faggot, or gay as nigga,” or something like that…you know, like that type of thing, stuff like that. Other than that, nothing else that I know of. Just little comments, I never saw anyone hit anyone or push anyone. But I also saw people getting along very well with folks too. And it wasn’t, it was just students working on a project together. People were just cool. I mean, I knew there were homophobic people.

“As Black Men, we Have all These Masculinity Issues”

N’diol came out to himself in junior high school, but he kept his homosexual identity to himself until he went to college. He came out to his family as a gay man at the age of 19 during his sophomore year of college. He attributed remaining in the closet for so long to the pressures and expectations placed on Black men in the Black community. As Black men we have all these masculinity issues. We’ve been through so much and have so much that we’re trying to break down. We have to prove our manhood so much just based on our experiences or our interaction with Europeans since we’ve been in this country, with White folks as we’ve been in this country. So I think that, I know that people feel that for you to be into another
man is like, that’s like the stamp right there; that’s what makes you not a man. You know it’s very evident just the way we interact with each other. You know, that we’ll call somebody a faggot, or if we’re referring to someone who is gay, we’ll bend our wrist. You know, that type of thing. It’s always about being gay, or being a faggot, being a sissy, being a punk. The ultimate man gets all the ladies, gets all the females. That’s just always around us. I remember there was this boy at my church growing up, and he looked up to me like a big brother, and he told his mom this. I was 17 at the time. She (his mother) was like, “My son said he thinks of you as big brother. He really looks up to you.” And I remember when he turned 15, I told him, now that you are 15 what are you going to do? And he said, “Well, my mom told me now that I am 15, I can bring a girl home. I can bring a girl home and have sex with her.” Isn’t that interesting? Damn, that’s deep, now that you are 15, you’re coming into a man, so you have to go have sex with a girl. You know, and your mother is telling you this. Your mother is teaching you how to objectify women. So, that’s all throughout. Homophobia is really thick in the Black community.
“I Think That Black People Have Been Broken Down”

N’diol discussed why he felt homophobia was so “thick” in the Black community. He paused for a moment, offered a slight grin, and looked downward before proceeding to speak. He spoke very steadily, yet slowly, as to be sure he was conveying his thoughts accurately.

It has roots. I think it begins with colonialism. Our interactions with Europeans, and the way they view us. Then slavery, and then us taking on their morals and characteristics. It’s hard to explain. It’s really deep, It’s really layered. I think that Black people have been broken down. In this country in particular, we have been broken down in so many ways that we are really trying to build ourselves up, and the only examples we have are examples of Europeans. So, I think in trying to please them, somehow, we were told or thought that same sex relationships are wrong. I think a lot of it is just being Christian in general. You know, like that was one way to keep Africans enslaved; to keep Black folks enslaved. They may have used the Bible and said this is the reason why you should be enslaved and all of this, and we took that on and believed it and made it true. People take things out the Bible, and may say, “Oh, it says right here, a man should not lie with another man the way he lies with a woman.” And you know folks start quoting stuff, and it gets deeply ingrained into our minds, and we pass that onto our children without really thinking about it. You know, I think a lot of Black folks just haven’t really been thinking for themselves. They’re just told what to think. And so they pass that down and it just gets bigger, bigger, and bigger. And, that’s
a problem. We were seen as property. We were like animals. And that’s been sunk into our psyche and passed down. Mainstream folks didn’t have those issues. Historically, I don’t know a whole lot about homosexuality, and acceptance. I know there were times in history when it was and it wasn’t accepted, but they don’t have those same issues. They don’t have to walk around and represent their whole race. They don’t have to be as afraid to be who they are because they’re dealing with racial issues. They’re able to be more who they are; they’re able to be more free.

*Coming to Terms With Being Gay*

Being called a “faggot” was confusing to N’diol. He did not know what the term meant, but at the same time, it was “hurtful.” He remembered feeling fearful of his same sex attraction, and how he turned to God to make his same sex attraction disappear. He eventually came to terms with his sexual orientation.

Like, I don’t know when I knew faggot was something bad. I guess by the time I was being called a faggot, I knew that it hurt. I don’t know why I knew that it hurt, but I knew it did. You know what I mean? I think because, you know growing up, I was a very cute kid, and all of my sister’s friends would kiss me, “Oh your brother’s so cute!” You know how people do, “Oh you’re a lady’s man, oh, you’re a heartbreaker.” And it’s always expected that you have a girlfriend, that you’re with a girl. That type of thing. So anything different from that must be wrong, I guess. I probably came out to myself in junior high, probably sixth or seventh grade. I didn’t think it was right. I used to pray for being gay to go away.
I used to cry and stuff. When I was in eleventh grade, maybe twelfth grade, somewhere around there is when I stopped that prayer because I was like, this is not going anywhere. I was like, this is it. So, I was like 16 or 17 when I decided for a fact that this is what it is.

“I Just Knew That Other Boys Were Going Through It”

N’diol came out to himself at a young age. He recalled having feelings of both same and opposite sex attraction at an even younger age.

You know what, I’m not sure that I thought it was different until I got a little older, like third or fourth grade. I mean, I can remember having crushes on girls when I was younger, but I can also remember having crushes on boys when I was younger too. I think my earliest boy crush was second or third grade. I remember having childhood experiences with other boys. We knew we were doing something we probably shouldn’t be doing, but I think it was the same way with girls. Like, a little boy and little girl shouldn’t be touching each other. It was the same thing with a little boy and a little boy. As I was getting older, I don’t know, there was something in me that knew there were other little boys that felt the same way, you know what I mean? I just kind of knew that other boys were going through it, and that maybe they felt like it was wrong too.

Being Called “Faggit”

Nonetheless, N’diol experienced teasing and verbal harassment by other children. As he recounted these incidents, he looked at the wall in front of him as though he was looking through it. He surely relived this part of his childhood all over again in this
moment. As I listened to him, it was like I was listening to the childhood N’diol. I could see that it was hurtful for him to recount.

Growing up, I did what I wanted to do, you know, what was interesting to me. So, if I wanted to jump rope with the girls or play hopscotch, I did. And if I got tired of that and wanted to play soccer or football or something, I would go do that. I could dance, took gymnastics, and I played soccer. I did all these different things. And a lot of the girls liked me as a friend. So, I had a lot of female friends. A lot of the boys could not understand that. They would call me, “faggot” just because I had a lot of female friends. I think I was a little ‘sweet (effeminate acting)’ back then. But they used to call me a faggot back then. Like, all the boys were asking me, “Do you like boys or girls?” I would think that was a trick question. Because if I say, “I like boys,” they will say I’m gay because you’re not supposed to like boys. Then I would think, but what if the right answer is that I should say I like girls? But then they gon’ say, “Oh you like girls, that’s why you hang around girls all the time, you must be gay.” So I used to think that was a trick question. I had to answer it in a very clever way. I would flip it back on them. I would say, “Well, why are you asking?” But, I never really answered that question because I didn’t know how. So, that was hurtful. But girls have always been drawn to me, and I’ve always been comfortable with a lot of girls. But when I started making friends who were male, and we started getting close, I used to get really afraid that people from my childhood who I grew up with would say, “Oh why you hang out with him? He’s gay.”
“It Was Easier for me to Tell my Male Friends”

N’diol socialized with “everybody” in college. He assumed that most people knew that he was gay. He revealed details of his decision to disclose his orientation to others. He also discussed the challenges with coming out to Black heterosexual women as opposed to coming out to Black heterosexual men.

I disclosed when it was just too draining, when it was just draining for them not to know. You know? And it was just weird. I’m a very private person, but that was like ultra private. I mean, I can’t talk about nobody I’m interested in, you know what I mean? Like that was just too much. I can’t talk about where I went yesterday, what I did, who I was hanging out with? Like, whoa! So, if they were my friends, I was like, that’s crazy for them not to know if they’re my friends, you know. But the funny thing is, and I think this may be ironic for a lot of people, it was easier for me to tell my male friends than to tell my female friends.

It was a lot easier. Because, for a few reasons. I’ve always been so close to girls, so it seemed like it might have been a harder fall. Girls have been my angels my whole life. Like, girls used to fight for me growing up, you know what I mean? Like, girls used to really protect me. Like I could handle myself, but like, if a guy came trying to make trouble with me, and my female friend was standing there, she wouldn’t step back. She would get in their face and try to fight them. I’d have to pull her away. And they just take really good care of me. They were always like my queens, my princesses, my mothers, my sisters, you know what I mean?
And I felt like I had a stronger, or a more, more of an allegiance to them in some kind of way. Additionally, a lot of girls told me that I would make a good husband, and they would tell me everything about themselves and their boyfriends. And, they really respected me, you know what I mean? And so, I think that it would be difficult for me to be like, “Sorry, but I’m gay.” And I always felt like it would be a knife to their heart that another good Black man was gay. So, that’s taking another good Black man out of the market. I feel bad about that. I always felt like I was betraying my mother, my sister, my queen. So that’s why its always been more difficult to tell female friends or Black women in general, because of that, because I’ve always been closer to them in general, so I’d feel like I’d be hurting them, even though, that’s not my problem. So, even today, with Black women who are interested in me, it’s difficult for me to be like, “Yeah, baby, I’m gay.”

Navigating Heterosexual Communities

Identifying as a masculine gay male, N’diol felt that he was somewhat spared from the world of teasing and harassment that he experienced as a child. N’diol identifies the Black community as being tolerant of conventionally masculine Black gay men as opposed to Black gay men who may possess stereotypical, effeminate traits. He also identifies mainstream White society as being an easier environment for Black gay men, although he really does not feel connected to mainstream society.

I feel like I’ve been really blessed as far as my experiences as a gay Black man. I feel like I have a lot more growing to do. Like, I have a friend who is pretty
effeminate. He’s very effeminate. He’s very intelligent. He’s very artistic. Just all around a great guy. He’s very creative, everything. Like, I live in a Black neighborhood. For me to walk down the street, like I can wear some skinny jeans, throw my hair up, I can wear my hair however I want to wear it. I can do a lot of things because when I walk down the street, people don’t look at me and say, “Oh, that’s a faggot. Look at this faggot.” But, he can just walk down the street, be in plain clothes, not doing anything, and people make remarks, people call him “faggot,” and just all sorts of things. He doesn’t want to live in that neighborhood. He doesn’t want to walk alone in that neighborhood. He had to stay with me for a weekend. It seemed like every time he wanted to go to a café or something, he wanted me to go with him. You know, because he doesn’t feel comfortable walking in that neighborhood by himself, or maybe without me or without a female or something like that. And so, he lives in a White neighborhood, and he’s very comfortable. He’s like, “I can’t live in an all Black neighborhood.” He doesn’t feel comfortable in Black neighborhoods, and that’s valid because White people are more accepting of gay Black people, I think. We have a plethora of issues that we trying to deal with in the Black community. I think it is easier for a Black gay man in mainstream society, kind of. I say kind of because I think a lot of times White people look at me, I have locks (dreadlocks), my face is clean right now, I have a lot of facial hair, and sometimes with the way I dress, people look at me, and sometimes they even think I’m a Rasta, depending on how I look that day. And so, if I’m gay, I don’t fit into what a gay man is supposed to be, and
especially if I’m Black, it’s like, “Dang, you’re supposed to be this way (as opposed to fitting into a stereotype).”

“Relationships With Heterosexual Students”

N’diol described having mostly positive relationships with heterosexual students in college, as many of his friendships were with heterosexuals. N’diol spent a lot of time defending his sexual orientation and convincing his heterosexual friends that he was in fact homosexual.

I’d say 98% of my heterosexual friends, they’re like, “No, you’re not (gay),” but, that’s just based on their idea of what it is to be gay. Like I have one friend who thinks I’m making it up…that it’s just for a study, or for a book I’m writing. They do me the same way, like, “Oh, you don’t seem gay.” Yeah, I had a lot of friendships. I remember guys used to always, like freshman year, like I don’t know if they questioned it or what, but guys used to ask me for relationship advice. Like they would be like, “Oh, I met this girl, and I really like her. I want to take her somewhere. Where should I take her? What should I buy her?” Or, “This happened, what should I say, what should I do?” They used to ask me for advice a lot. And I had a lot of female friends. You know like a lot of pretty girls. Guys used to ask me to hook them up a lot. They’d be like, “You hittin’ that (having a sexual relationship), you hittin’ that? If you not, man you oughta hook me up. Put me down! You know all the females; you know all the fine females, man,” things like that. I don’t know. I had a lot of friendships and acquaintances.
"He Said he Wouldn’t Tell Anybody"

Reflecting on the challenges that he encountered as he became more comfortable with being an out, gay Black man, N’diol described a situation that occurred after disclosing his sexual orientation to a close heterosexual male friend while in college.

We were really close. I mean, we were like this (crossing index and middle fingers), and he had a drinking problem. I don’t drink at all. We were like 19 years old, and he called me in the middle of the night one time. He was drunk, and he was going through a lot. He said, “Man you are my boy, you are my ace. I’ve never had a friend like you before. I really respect you.” He was saying all these great things. I said, “What could I do to make you lose respect for me?” And he said, “Man, if you started drinking, that would really hurt me, and I would lose respect for you because that’s one thing that I truly admire about you, your strength against drinking.” And I asked, “Is that it?” And he said, “Yeah, if you started drinking that would really tear me apart.” And so I asked, “Well, what if I was bisexual? What would you think about that?” Knowing good and well I aint bisexual, I don’t like girls. So anyway, he was like, “Man, hold on. Forget that. Are you?” And I said, “Yeah, I am.” He was like, “Man, I don’t care about that. You’re my boy. You’re my friend. You know, and don’t listen to what other people say ‘cause they’re not your real friends.” And he was saying all these great things. He was actually going to come home with me during break, for the holiday break. And I was like, wow, that was easy. That felt really good. So a few days later after he sobered up, he called me and was telling me how he wouldn’t be
able to go home with me, and we had this conversation, and it really freaked him out, and he thought I was trying to come on to him, and he didn’t understand why I was gay, and he said he wouldn’t tell anybody. The next thing I know, my roommate, who was also a close friend, we were all close friends, and another close friend of mine told me that he told them, and that he was going through all this stuff. He told his parents. He told everyone. But it wasn’t like malicious. It wasn’t like, “Oh, he’s gay. He’s gay! [N’diol whispered this in an evil voice]” It was sort of like, “I think he’s was trying to hit on me. I can’t believe he’s gay.” I think he was seeking some sort of advice you know, from them. And from the story I hear, when he told them, they were like, “So? And he’s gay, and?” That’s the story I heard. It just got weird between us. He started trying to hook me up with girls. Girls he thought I was interested in before, he wanted me to start hooking him up with them. You know, like it got really strange. We really, really drifted apart. It was hurtful. But, it turned out to be a good thing because like 2 years later, he called me and apologized, and was like, “I apologize, I was immature. I was ignorant. You were the best friend I ever had, and I just didn’t know how to deal with that. It was all so new to me. I apologize.”

**Navigating Homosexual Communities**

On the other hand, N’diol identified facets of the homosexual Black community as subscribing to similar notions of hyper masculinity as supported by the heterosexual Black community. In certain gay settings, both Black and White, he expressed not feeling comfortable.
I don’t really move in White gay society. I mean, I’ve been to a White gay club with all the White boys, and they’re not checking (paying attention to) for me. I would say that I feel different from mainstream gay Black folks. It’s the Internet culture; it’s the club culture. Everybody is sort of on. You got to be a certain way. You got to look a certain way. You got to talk a certain way. You have to do this. It’s too much for me. I remember one time I went to this club with this guy. I just like to be comfortable, so I was wearing a tee shirt, jeans, sneakers, I was just going. One of the guys that we were with was like, “Oh, you’re so attractive.” I didn’t know him very well, but we were all just hanging out, but he was like, “You’re very attractive.” And I told him, “Yeah, but when I come to these places, guys just don’t approach me.” He was like, “Because you too yourself…you are yourself too much and they don’t want to see that. They don’t like that.” He told me, “The next time we go out, I’m going to put a fitted hat on you, a jersey…and I’m telling you, you’ll get a lot of attention. You’ll get a lot of numbers. They don’t want to know that you the type of person that likes to read. They don’t want to know that you like to do this and do that.” That’s not what it’s about. I’m uncomfortable that way. But, I was going to experiment one time. I wanted to see what these shallow ass folks are really like. So, I was going to conduct my own little experiment, but I never had the energy to do that. So, if I dressed more urban (according to the guy at the club), then I would get more attention. I’m just not into that. I’m not into all of that. I always feel uncomfortable when I’m at a gay club. Even at a gay party, I can relax a little bit, but I feel out of place.
“Gay People Thought That I Was Mean”

Aside from a very small pool of gay friends, N’diol described not wanting to establish friendships with other gay students on campus. He felt insecure about having a large circle of gay friends for a variety of reasons, including the possible harassment that he could face if heterosexual students saw him associating with other openly gay students.

I didn’t care to associate too much with the ones that I knew in fact were gay because, I guess because of my own insecurities. I don’t know. It was probably my own insecurities at the time. I don’t know. I was pretty satisfied with my situation. I don’t think that I wanted to get a whole bunch of gay friends. I started going to gay clubs, and I would see people, and wanted to avoid them. But then, it was like, who cares? But I didn’t want them to think we were going to be best friends because we saw each other in the club. So, a lot of people thought I was really cold, and they thought I was really mean, and they thought I had all these issues with myself. And that wasn’t even the case because by that time, most of my friends knew that I was gay. My mom knew that I was gay. I had already decided I was gay. So, it wasn’t that I was closeted. I just didn’t run around telling everybody. But, if anybody asked me, I would tell them. So, gay people thought that I was mean. But, I just felt like we didn’t have to be friends. Like they wanted to be friends with me, but I didn’t feel that we had to be friends. So, I guess the challenges were, “What if I’m with some people that I’m not really friends with, but associates or people I’m really cool with, and the gay boys come up and say
something, how am I going to handle that situation?” So, I think that was the challenge. So, I had to figure that out, or not be so insecure about it.

“You Have to Accept the Lord, Jesus Christ as Your Savior”

N’diol received blatant messages about spirituality and religion early on from both his maternal and paternal grandparents.

My grandparents on my mother’s side were very spiritual and religious, but not like, you’re going to burn in hell if you don’t respect folks. They were more like, we go to church on Sunday, we go to bible study on Wednesday, we pray. We’re leading by example, so I don’t have to force it down your throat. My other grandparents, they were also good people, but they would read you verses. They were very religious. Like, my grandfather was a preacher, and my grandmother was a state missionary. They were very religious. They were very, you know Black folks, you got to be sittin’ down when it’s storming, there were a lot of rules that they had.

“But You’re not Good Enough”

As he recounted a particular childhood memory about religiosity, it was as though I was speaking with a childhood N’diol. His adult self seemed to travel back in time to this specific incident.

That’s interesting because I remember when I was maybe 11 or 12 years old, my grandmother’s niece said to me, “I hear that you’re a very good child. You’re very nice and respectful.” And I was like, “Yes.” And she said, “But you’re not good enough. You have to accept the Lord, Jesus Christ as your savior.” And I was just
like, “Whoa.” I was like, “That’s deep.” I think at that moment, I was like, something about that doesn’t seem right to me. You know what I mean? There were things we couldn’t say. We couldn’t say ‘fool’ because your life would be shortened. It was that kind of thing, you know what I mean?

“I Gave in and Told Him, and He Gave Me a Bible Scripture”

N’diol described another situation in which a heterosexual male friend took offense that N’diol had not disclosed his sexual orientation. When N’diol finally disclosed to his friend that he was in fact a gay man, his friend used it as an opportunity to introduce religion into their conversation as a way of delivering N’diol from being homosexual.

Another friend started getting a little suspicious and would ask my roommate, “Is he gay, is he gay?” And so, my roommate wouldn’t answer. And my roommate was like, “He keeps asking if you gay, I don’t know how much longer I can keep, you know (dodge the question)…” I was like, “I don’t care.” So, I remember one day he saw me talking, like this guy would come up to my room. We were just cool though (nothing romantic). He claims he saw me and the guy walking up to my room and he said that when we saw him, we pretended to go another way so he wouldn’t come up there, which isn’t true. So, in his mind, those were the signs (that I was gay). He asked me one day, “Have I ever done anything or said anything to offend you?” And I knew where he was going, so I wanted to have a little fun with it. So I was like, “No.” And he was like, “Are you sure?” I said, “No, not at all.” He was like, “Oh, because I feel like I may have said some things
that have offended you in the past.” I said, “Not at all.” He was like, “Well, I think you know what I’m talking about.” And I was like, “But, I don’t though.” I was just having fun with it. And he was getting really nervous because he didn’t know how to ask. So, I saw him sweating a little bit, so I gave in and told him. And he gave me a bible scripture. Actually he gave me a little book of like something about the Christian life and these prayers. I think he really believes it’s a sin, and thought, “You’re my friend and I want to help you.” And he was like, “I know I’m not perfect.” And I was like, “You’re right, you’re not.” And he was like, “You know, but just read it anyway.”

On Being a “Black American”

N’diol recognized certain complexities in terms of his racial/ethnic identity. He smiled and squirmed awkwardly in his seat as he began to discuss this particular identity. I would call myself a Black American. It is weird because if it were a longer conversation, we would get into why people identify as African American, why we came up with that title, and how I identify with that title. But then we would get into how I have issues with it since having traveled abroad. I came back and came to the conclusion that maybe African American was something we gave ourselves to empower ourselves to connect us back to Africa. But then, maybe that’s not a term that we gave ourselves. Because you know we’re not calling White Americans, “Dutch Americans,” nothing like that. So, we are all Americans. If I had to check anything, it would be Black American, African American, Black/Non-Hispanic, something like that.
Can You Really Be Afrocentric and Gay?

N’diol reflected on his journey as a man with multiple identities. In many ways, he received messages that if one was homosexual, then he was not also a Black male; and if one was a Black male, then there was no way that he could also be homosexual.

Well, growing up, I felt like, I know I’m not the only boy who likes boys. I know I’m not the only one. The ones I knew were gay for a fact were effeminate. But I knew there was more to it. I knew that wasn’t the only form that gay Black men came in. So, I think I’ve always challenged that notion that this is what makes you a man, and this is what makes you gay. Even though my father, you know my father is this really tough guy, but I’ve seen him cry before. I’ve seen my father in very vulnerable states, but he’s still a very tough man. And so, him being vulnerable and showing a softer side, didn’t make me think of him as less of a man. So, I think for me, I’ve always challenged those ideas of masculinity, because I know people who I assume are heterosexual, who are slightly effeminate. I think one thing that I have issue with…I wasn’t sure, because I grew up in the type of family, my mother’s very Afrocentric, and she passed that onto us, which is great. I think I had issues with being both. I kind of felt like, “Can you really be Afrocentric and gay? Do they go together?” Not so much can you be masculine and gay, but can you be Afrocentric and proud of who you are as a Black man and a gay man, because I’ve always been told that is something we picked up from Europeans. That’s not something that has ever really been part of our culture as African people. So, I used to have issues with that. Can I be both?
The Afrocentric thinkers that I’ve always been exposed to, none of them were ever gay, or said they were gay. Then the older I got, and the more I started to learn about certain leaders during the Civil Right’s movement, writers, all kinds of people who were very proud to be Black, proud of their heritage, and who were also gay, such as Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Bayard Rustin. So, when I started learning, I thought, okay, you can. But still, a lot of Afrocentric folks will have you think that you can’t be that, and that it’s wrong.

*The Honor of Going to an HBCU*

Conversely, N’diol described his greatest rewards as a Black gay man at an HBCU. As he reflected, a smile of pride adorned his face.

Going to an HBCU opened my eyes up to the spectrum of Black people. Knowing that there were, that there are a lot of Black people who share my interests, who have interests that are different from mine, and different than what’s in the box of the Black community. I was able to learn from them. For example, at my high school you were either a Black kid who only hung out with White kids, you were from the burbs, you had both of your parents, you had a little money, and most of your friends were White. The other type was you’re a Black kid, you hang out with all White kids, you live in the ‘burbs, and you’re a skater (skateboarder); or, you are from the ‘hood, you a thug, or you from the hood, but you’re not of it; you make good grades, education is still important to you, you know saying no to drugs is still important, going to college, all those things are still important to you. Those were all the people I knew. So, if you were Black, and your pants were
hanging down, you were saggin,’ and you had cornrows, and you listened to hip hop, then I felt that I knew what kind of person you are. You were a thug, you ‘hood, you don’t read, you don’t care about anything. So when I went to college, and met Black people who dressed liked that, but were very intelligent, that blew my mind. Or meeting Black people who spoke more than two different languages, or who were interested in going to med school, law school, becoming engineers, actors. I met Black people who were familiar with plays from classical pieces to contemporary pieces. So what it did for me, it just opened my eyes to all the different shades of Black folks, and Black folks who dress however they want to dress, and are just who they are, and just doing their thing. Because before, I just felt like a weirdo, and people used to call me a weirdo because I didn’t fit into that little box. It just opened me up.

Self-Reflective Profile: Thompson

I met Thompson on a cold, snowy day during spring. When I arrived at his posh, high-rise apartment building located in the heart of the downtown metro area of a major Midwestern city, I was both impressed and eager to see and speak to him. As I stood alongside the doorman’s booth, the image that I created in my head of a clean-cut man sporting a three-piece suit was quickly erased when the elevator doors opened, and Thompson emerged. Thompson had shoulder length dreadlocks, which he re-twisted during our interview, and he was dressed very casually in athletic pants and an oversized t-shirt.
We took the elevator upward to his apartment’s floor. Along the way, we talked about the weather and my travels to his city. As we exited the elevator, I continued to be taken by the décor of his building. The hallway leading to his apartment was regal and elegant. The blending of various rich colors, including evergreen, gold, and royal purple surely made it feel as though you were walking the halls of some majestic palace. As we entered his sprawling apartment, he was exceptionally courteous, encouraging me to make myself at home, and immediately offering me a refreshment.

Thompson graduated from a very small, private HBCU located in the Midwest. After completing his associate’s degree at a community college, he transferred to this HBCU to complete his bachelor’s degree. Spending two years at an HBCU, Thompson’s college experiences are from the unique perspective of a transfer student, as opposed to the experiences of a student who matriculated freshman year and continued through to graduation. Thompson is quite accomplished. He has his M.B.A. from a prestigious PWI in the Midwest, and he is an administrator in the business world. His interest in the field of business explained the various publications that adorned his apartment, including *Black Enterprise* magazine.

*Growing up Middle Class*

Thompson’s quest for higher education is due in part to the influence of his parents. Thompson’s mother and father are college educated. His parents instilled the value of a college education in Thompson and his two younger brothers. Prior to his parents’ divorce, Thompson grew up in predominantly middle class neighborhoods for a
short while. He talked about growing up as an African American in a predominantly
White neighborhood.

When I turned about five or six, my father was working for a restaurant, and got a
really great position to move up the ranks as supervisor, and we moved to a
predominantly White neighborhood. When I started kindergarten, I was in an all
Black school. When I started first grade, I was in an all White school. So growing
up, I remember thinking about this a couple days ago, all my friends were White.
I didn’t really have any African American friends. And I never thought about it. I
guess growing up at only six or seven years old, I didn’t say, “Ooh, I need to get
some more Black friends.” That didn’t happen until I hit middle school.

*From Middle Class to Homeless*

When his parents divorced, Thompson’s middle class upbringing was brought to a
halt. He and his brothers resided with their mother, and experienced many struggles and
hardships.

My mother went through a major depression immediately following the divorce
that lasted the remainder of her life. She turned to alcohol as a means to self-
medicate herself. Due to her instant lack of income because of the divorce and her
illness, our “new” family constantly found challenging circumstances. This
included being homeless numerous times throughout my youth. My mother,
brothers, and I continually found ourselves sleeping in the car, or seeking refuge
in shelters and hotels provided by the Salvation Army or Volunteers of America.
When my mother did find stable housing, it usually was in less than favorable
neighborhoods. Throughout my teenage years, I often found myself embarrassed of my family’s circumstances; that included purchasing groceries with good stamps, never having a home telephone to utilize, or using food tickets to purchase my lunch at school.

“I Always Felt Like I Need to Prove Myself”

Having to transition from a stable, two-parent upbringing to a single parent, impoverished household could take a problematic toll on many children. Thompson encountered challenges with others, including Black children, school personnel, and the general Black community as he struggled to avoid becoming a statistic. Proving himself to others became a big part of his identity.

I remember a certain school and everyone laughed at me and kept asking me, “Where are you from? You have an accent.” I remember at that time that I tried to change my dialect and my vocabulary because I thought I spoke too properly at that time…I don’t know. I always felt like I had to prove myself. I had to prove myself. So many times, I would act out due to the fact I was frustrated…severely frustrated. So I found myself either stigmatized…I was always classified as the bad child in the class, or I always found myself trying to prove myself, that you know, I’m really not that dumb. Then, once I moved on into middle school, I then became a nerd because here I am coming from an alternative school going to public school at that time, and the things they were giving me, I could do my homework in 15 minutes, for the entire night. And I could do it usually in homeroom…so…I went from being a bad student to being the geek. It’s one thing
to be the bad student because everyone looks down on you, but at least you’re accepted. You become the geek, everyone laughs at you, call you “Poindexter” and “Urkle.” So, me proving myself, me saying, I’m not what you think I am. I’m not that child from the ‘hood that has no manners, that can’t learn, can’t read or write…so, proving myself, from one extreme to another. Even in the Black community, I would say I need to prove myself. We’re back at that again. I always feel challenged especially at this point in my life, people are expecting the world out of me at this point, or they are expecting absolutely nothing at all. You know, it’s…it’s…I still fall into that geek category or I fall into that bad boy category, it depends on who you talk to.

*Being a “Nerd” Versus a “Bad boy”*

When asked how it makes him feel to fall into a nerd category and a bad boy category, Thompson smiled and reflected. As he responded, it seemed as though he struggled, yet found a level of conceit in being both a “nerd” and a “bad boy.”

I’m kind of accustomed to it, kind of used to it now. And that’s me going from school to school. Going from associates to bachelors to grad school at this point. It’s still the same thing. I remember having this conversation a couple months ago at work, and they were like, “You were the typical geek in school, weren’t you?” They said, “You’re the geek because you know, you got all the good grades, you went to all the awards banquets.” And I said, “Well, yeah I did. I went to a school that, again I wasn’t necessarily challenged, so it gave me a lot of room to…I did
okay.” If I dedicated myself to it, I would have done outstanding… I could’ve been an outstanding student.

*Ridding the Stigma: Choosing an HBCU*

Being called a “sellout” as a youngster affected Thompson. This is one of the reasons that he chose to attend an HBCU.

I chose an African American college because I felt I wasn’t Black enough. I chose to attend a historically Black college for a couple different reasons. You know, watching shows like *A Different World*, gave me the inspiration to go. Knowing that in the Black community, saying that you’ve gone to an HBCU was prestigious. I wanted to experience the Black community in more detail. I wanted to feel that I was more African American than what I really was. I thought that would help with that situation. I felt like I was the White boy. I felt by going to the HBCU, I would get rid of that, get rid of the stigma. That’s why I went. Actually, the colleges that I looked at, and where I actually ended up, I didn’t think I was going to end up there. I had looked at Morgan State. I thought about going to Hampton; I didn’t realize my parents needed to be millionaires to go there (laughter). Again, I never thought I would end up at my HBCU. At the time, it worked out really well due to the fact I graduated from a community college, and headed to that school that following fall. The package was offered to me from my HBCU. Not only that, my brother was going to a PWI that same year, that same time, which was less than 30 minutes away. That just really worked out for the both of us being that close to one another. Now that I look back, it was a really
good thing. I don’t know if I would have survived or graduated if I went further from home.

*College Roommate Experiences*

Thompson majored in marketing, and lived in on campus for one year. “The first semester was with a roommate.” The second semester was by himself. Although he was a non-traditional student, he “wanted the full college experience, that was the whole purpose.” Living on-campus authenticated that purpose. His roommate situation was extremely positive.

My roommate, my good friend, I remember how we found out about each other. We had computers in our dorm rooms, and we would be in our rooms playing on the internet, chatting on this gay website, and one day, he came to my room, knocked on the door, I had the site up and minimized it…he came in and saw it on there (laughter), and he didn’t say anything…and the next day he said, “you know I chat on the website too (laughter)!” And so from that point, it was like…he became my best friend in school. We always went to lunch together. We always hung out together. And then it came time, we left for the summer, and I said, you know I need a roommate, and he was like, “I’ll be your roommate.” And he became my roommate. So, it worked out really well.
Thompson dated while in college, however he rarely dated individuals who were also in college. As a 19-year old, he dated a 35-year old man. He arrived to his HBCU with much exposure to the gay community. He reflected on his dating life while in college, often seeing his role as a mentor and counselor to his younger gay friends.

I felt like the odd guy out. I hate to admit this I felt like a movie star. I was always the guy that people wanted, but I was always unattainable. I never dated anyone in college, except one experience, and I never dated that guy, just messed around, which is sad to admit. I never dated anyone I went to school with. At that time, I was hanging around friends, they were a little bit older than I was. I went off to school, and I was 22, going to school and being around 18 and 19 year olds. Not only that, but I’m hanging around 34 and 35 year olds, and for that reason, it always seemed like they (my college friends) were little kids to me. But yeah, I never dated anyone. People would come to me with their concerns, “I’m seeing this guy, or I’m messing around with this guy, what should I do?” I always felt like I was the mother/father figure. I was always the one that everyone looked up to and aspired to be like, “Ooh, Thompson’s doing this. Ooh, Thompson’s going to this party.” You know? I was the one who set the tone. I hate to say that, but I was. And everyone, because of the fact that they were so young, and I was doing all these gay and fabulous things at the time, people always came to me. So, I’ve never dated anyone at an HBCU. I thought I would have that experience but never did.
Relationships With Heterosexual Students

Thompson entered his HBCU in his early 20s. He felt that people always thought of him as being a snob or “stuck-up.” At times, He felt that his age and maturity secluded him to being around “like-minded people.” Thompson found comfort in being around heterosexual students on campus. He reflected on these relationships.

My experience with heterosexuals, I didn’t have an issue. Especially at an HBCU, my school was so small, we all knew everyone, but everyone had their own pockets, and you hung around with this crowd, or this crowd, you hung around with this crowd. Every now and again, there would be some intermingling…say two gay groups would have something around the same time. You hung around who you hung around with. The people who were heterosexual that I hung around with, I never had an issue with. It was me hanging around the karate team, or the nerds, or fraternity people, or sorority girls. Even when my roommate and I moved in together, I never felt that people asked us, “Ooh, the two of them are messing around. They are living as husband and wife.” That never happened. I never even thought about it the whole time I was there. And that’s because he (my roommate) was messin’ around with a guy who was a member of a fraternity. He was the [names the fraternity], number one on the totem pole. Never an issue. Never an issue. I guess that’s why I never had an issue about being so out there. I never ran into any of the experiences that my friends ran into. Again, I was really cocky. I had that attitude like, “I wish you would say I’m a sissy, I wish you would!” And so, people knew, “You better not mess with him.” And I guess that
just added to the cockiness of who I was and what I did. My thought process was that, everything you can I can do it better. Just because you think you can be in a fraternity, you know what, I can do it too! You think you can do this, that, and the other, well you know what, so can I. And so, it was always me proving myself.

“I Knew I Was Needed in the Fraternity”

Thompson identified the majority of his friends as being “males, African American, and gay.” He also practiced and participated in various other activities. “I was on the karate team. I hung out with those people a lot.” He also hung out with his college roommate, and friends of his roommate. Thompson began the membership process for a fraternity as well, and he “hung out with a lot of those guys.” He spoke about his experiences going through this process and how the fraternity dealt with his being a gay man.

It was a spoken unspoken. I think that’s the way my life has gone at this point. Even the fraternity, spoken unspoken. The fraternity situation was kind of interesting. Because, you know I was one of those people who just…I look back on my early 20s and I realize that I was kind of cocky and very arrogant, which is something I’ve worked through. But, I knew I was needed in the fraternity. It was one of those situations that even if they didn’t want me, they knew they had to pick me up. I came from a legacy (my father is a member of the same fraternity). And so for that reason alone, they knew they had to do something, at least to get me through the pre-pledging process. Now if I didn’t make it through, it would have been due to something that I did. There was no way in the world I would
have let them break me down. They were aware (that I was gay). I remember when I was going through the pre-pledging (membership) process, I had cornrows. They kept saying, “No one in our fraternity has long hair. What are you going to do with that?” It was an issue. It had more to do with not that I had cornrows, but that I had long hair. They didn’t call me a sissy, but I could tell that’s where they were going with it. Black fraternities are not welcoming of Black gay men. And due to the fact that I had no qualms or issues with what I was doing, it was hard to accept me, and I knew it. I knew that my pledging this fraternity would be a little more intense than my counterparts. I was aware of that, but I was still willing to go through the whole situation, more so, again, to prove myself, to show that I could do it. I did not complete the pledging process. I had a car accident when I was going through the whole process. Um, the weekend when they started the official pledging process, I was in the hospital, in a coma. When I came out, I found it to be in my best interest at that time. It was more of a choice of do I want to pledge for a fraternity or do I want to graduate from school. So, I chose the latter of the two. I thought I may be a little more successful if I graduated first, and then try the pledging process afterwards.

“I Always Think People Automatically Know”

Thompson considered himself to be completely out as a gay male when he arrived to his HBCU at the age of 22. He assumed that people just knew that he was gay, and rarely felt the need to disclose his sexual orientation to some people while attending an HBCU.
I remember when I first started school there, and I remember there were individuals that I would look at, and I would tell myself, “I will never talk to that flaming queen (for fear of being associated as a gay man).” Going to a Black college, again, just like anything in life, going to an HBCU is like going to a Black church. Basically, you know certain things are looked down upon, and that was one of the main ones. And, I really felt that if I had this don’t ask, don’t tell policy, no one would know. I did get away with that for a few months when I first got there. I won’t say no one knew, but it wasn’t a huge concern. It wasn’t like, “Oh, he’s one of them,” which I eventually became. Going off to school, I thought everyone knew as I always think everyone knows. I always think people automatically know. It’s something I’m working through. It’s one or the other.

“I’ve Always Known”

On top of all of the challenges that Thompson encountered as Black child growing into manhood, he reflected on when he knew that he was homosexual. He prayed to God for his homosexual feelings to go away.

I’ve always known. I’m one of those guys who can say I’ve always known. From the time I was four-years old, and my mother kept reprimanding me for wearing her high heels and her make-up, and my love for Diana Ross (laughter). I’ve always known! There was never a question. She’s always known too, whether she wanted to admit it. I remember at eight, I remember I was going to have my birthday party and I went up to my bedroom. I prayed, “Okay, God I just want to
have one sexual experience with a man, and I’ll get married, and have some kids, and I won’t do it anymore.” I was eight! So, I’ve always known.

On Coming Out

Thompson did not see himself as having gone through a formal coming out process. He described how he was “forced” out of the closet by an ex-boyfriend.

When I came to terms with it officially, I was 19, when my mother found out. I was forced out of the closet at 19. I never had a coming out process. I never had the whole “am I going to tell them now?” Somebody (his ex-boyfriend) told them for me. A 35 year-old individual I was dating took it upon himself to inform my mother that we were more than just “friends.” So, I’m happy they did when I look back on it now. At the time, I thought it was the end of the world. My mother was relieved at the time because she thought I was selling drugs due to all of the material possessions I was receiving from this gentleman. She later told me that she had always known, and was thrilled that I was finally being honest with her. She found out, and was like, “don’t tell anyone.” And of course, everyone already knew. She also told me that my homosexuality was simply a “phase” I was encountering, and that I would eventually grow out of it.

Dealing With Family After Coming Out

Thompson did not grow out of the “phase.” While he described his relationship with his family as being “very close and endearing,” he also reflected on the challenges and misunderstandings he faced with some family members because of his sexual orientation.
This is really starting to process for me. I remember my brother grew very fast in my household, my youngest brother. And by the time he was 13, he was like very boisterous and very loud. My mother would try to reprimand him. And so it would kind of piss me off, him fighting back. And I told him, “You know you can’t do that, that’s your mother.” And he responded, “Well who are you? You’re just a fag anyway!” Yeah, of course I took that personally. He and I got into it. You want to call me fag. I’m going to show you what a fag is like. But since then, he never called me a fag. He was here a couple weeks ago, as a matter of fact. He and I had this conversation. He said, “You know I’ve always been thankful that people, that I am close with, I eventually tell them that my brother is gay. And they’re like, “No he’s not. You’re kidding me!” And he says, “I’ve always been proud to say you are my brother, and the fact that it’s not an issue that you are gay. Now I know there’s no one else here to tell you this at this point because momma’s gone, but you know you’re not allowed to wear panties (laughter)! I saw this guy and he had on some panties, and I wanted to let you know you can’t wear any panties!” Well, wearing panties has never been a goal of mine, so I thought that was too cute for words (laughter). One day, my great aunt said, this was years ago, around 10 years ago when I think about it, and she was like, “We don’t want to see you on the Jerry Springer Show! (laughter)” I was like, “What makes you think (laughing)…that I’m going on the Springer show?” I’m so mad with her because of that. But yeah, I was young, and it was a new thing for everybody. So, you gotta think you’re going to face challenges just as far as
family, professional life, just as far as society is concerned in general. Having to prove yourself has been my fight, my battle. But you have to be aware… I think that is a key aspect. I’ve met a lot of challenges because growing up and knowing that you’re gay, and trying to hide and disguise it, just makes it even worse than what it is to begin with. It just really… um, just intensifies the situation. So, I just spent most of puberty trying to pretend that I was something that I’m not. Furthermore, for the longest period of my life, my family didn’t know who I was. They told me this. From 13 through 18, I was trying to hide so much that I just hid everything at that point; which I think affects a lot of the things I do today. I know I have a lot of issues with communication. I’m working on that. I think that dates back to my trying to hide so much of my life even from my most immediate family. It has definitely continued on in my life today. But yeah, I remember having a lot of issues growing up. I remember thinking, “People are going to think I’m gay because I do this, because I walk this way, because I do this;” and me working through issues, and trying to disguise it and not let people know, which is hilarious now that I think about it.

**Being Gay in the Black Community**

Thompson saw himself as fulfilling some stereotypes in terms of being a gay Black male, which included: having a disposable income, “too much of it at this point,” taking lavish trips, going shopping, having a great education, and having a wonderful apartment. According to Thompson, “all of that stuff is evident… I fall more into the
stereotype of a gay Black male than I want to.” He discussed how he navigated the Black community as a Black gay man.

It’s a don’t ask, don’t tell policy for me. I really feel that way. It’s not that people don’t know already, because it’s more than evident in the way I conduct myself. It’s like I said, I’m [says age] years old, I don’t have any kids, I’ve never been married, and it just speaks for itself, I sincerely believe that. But I feel like I’m one of those guys where people say, “Well yeah, he’s gay, but he’s cool.” Um, I’ve never had that issue with…where I feel like I’ve been stepped over for one reason or another due to the fact that I am gay, especially in the Black community. The church that I was going to, it was an old school church, everyone knew me there. Again, there was no question. I mean, like I said, my mother knew it more than I knew it. And due to the things that I have accomplished and done with my life, no one’s really had any qualms about it. Um from my family all the way down, it’s…and I’ve been blessed as far as I am concerned, you know, “I’m not going to have anything to do with you because I found out you’re gay.” Like I said, nine times out of ten, people already knew.

*Being Gay in Mainstream Society*

On the other hand, Thompson described his experiences as a gay man in mainstream White communities.

In mainstream White society, it’s okay because everyone is more accepting of it. There’s no question of, “Is it okay?” The Black community is a little different. Just the way everyone was brought up in the Black community, the Black church
especially is at the forefront of how people think. And um, I think it is easier in mainstream White society. But um, Black people have so many stereotypes that they encompass, you have to work a little harder in the Black community to be accepted.

“I Still Forecast all the Same Things That Most Black Men Forecast”

Thompson was taught that Black men behave in a manner associated with strength and hyper masculinity. He was also taught that gay men behaved in a certain manner, typically associated with less than stereotypical macho behavior. He reflected on whether there is contradiction in being both a Black and gay man.

Black men are supposed to be machismo. Guys don’t cry. We love sports, have a power belt, talk about women. That’s stereotypical Black male, simple as that. Not that I thought I would be the most macho guy in the world. I know with my father, there were certain things expected of me as a man, certain things I know I couldn’t get away with. Of course, I know there were certain things that were expected of me. Just being the oldest child, there are things that I wouldn’t have gotten through my mother. Even to this day, I know there are things about me that don’t fall into the stereotypical guy thing. I don’t necessarily have tool belt. All in the same breath, I think I still forecast all the same things that most Black men forecast. I think what gives me away (as being gay) is that I’m very manicured, my clothes match too well, I don’t have kids, I don’t talk about women, I’m extremely well-educated, and no one’s ever seen me with a woman. It speaks for itself. The question is do you go back to stereotypes? And you know, stereotypes
are based on some truth. I mean, I have numerous friends who are flamboyant, who do flamboyant, feminine things. All in the same breath, the majority of my friends at this point fall into the same category as most men, except instead of discussing women all the time, they discuss men. They do work on their cars. I think it’s such the trait now to become the opposite of the feminine characteristic that we saw many years ago, that everyone’s new thing now is to become whatever they see as forecasted on Black Entertainment Television (BET). I’m watching a show last night on BET. All these guys are talking about their cars, and I’m looking at each and every last one of them, and I’m thinking, at any given time, any one of these guys could easily be sleeping with another man. I mean, there’s a guy who’s on The Wire (a television series); I keep hearing about, he’s a drug dealer, and on the show, he goes home to a man. So, I don’t think guys fall into that same stigma as they did once upon a time. Once upon a time, a person in church who was more likely to be a homosexual was the choir director. In today’s age, it’s probably going to be the pastor.

_Finding Strength in the Black Community_

Thompson expressed how important it was for him to realize and to understand that he was not wrong for being a gay man. He felt that coming to terms with sexual orientation was a major hurdle for African American gay men.

That’s the first thing that most gay African American males feel, that what I am doing is not just wrong in terms of society, but it’s wrong in terms of God, in terms of just life in general because it’s not what I was supposed to be doing. It
takes a very strong person to realize that they certainly don’t have a choice in that matter because who would choose something so ridiculed and so looked down upon? Why? It’s like someone saying, I’m going to choose to be African American because it’s the in thing to do. The first thing you need to do is realize that what you’re doing is not wrong. For that reason, many people won’t attempt to hide it as much, which will definitely help in the whole situation. I think once you’re comfortable in your own skin, people tend to be comfortable with you. I know once you invoke panic within any area of your life, everyone around you will definitely react the exact same way.

“Switching” to Fit In

Moving back and forth between groups and switching his behavior was not at all a foreign concept to Thompson. He reflected on these experiences, and compared himself to the chameleon-like character in the feature film, *Six degrees of Separation*.

I’ve been told that I’m a chameleon, and that I adapt to whatever situation I’m in. My thought process is that upon meeting someone, I may act in a certain manner to fit the situation. As I’ve grown older, and have started to mature, there really aren’t too many different sides to me. I was a guy who wore a lot of different hats. I felt privileged because I could pull it off. I felt like the character from *Six Degrees of Separation*. I felt like I knew how to change my dialect or change my vocabulary to make me fit in with a certain group of people. And not only could I change it, and my style of dress and my hair, but I could make it work. People thought that whatever style I was giving them, that was me. If I was with White
coworkers and we decided to have drinks, compared to me going out to have
drinks with the pre-pledging fraternity guys I was with, it’s going to be two totally
different sides. And not only that, but I was able to fit in with both sides, meaning
that I was able to converse, discuss issues that were relevant to both sides, to the
point that you thought I was living this in my everyday life. But again, I knew that
a lot of my friends couldn’t have pulled off things I was doing based on the fact
that they had an extreme effeminate edge, or they were extremely urban, or they
were extremely…brought up in a certain style of life that they could not switch on
and off. But due to my life and being that at one time or another I have seen that
side of life and lived it, I was able to do it. So, it’s amazing when I think back on
it.

Witnessing Sexual Harassment

Thompson felt that his ability to act masculine and “pass” as a heterosexual male
prevented him from becoming a victim of any form of sexual harassment based on his
sexual orientation. On the other hand, he witnessed heterosexual male students harassing
both gay and students perceived to be gay on campus.

You would hear them whispering, “Look at this sissy over there.” There were
ones (heterosexual students) who had an interest in me because I could pass (for
being heterosexual). I’ve seen it (harassment) take place especially with a 24/7
drag queen on my campus. They treated her like dirt. It made me rethink some of
my thought processes. You know, regardless of what’s going on, how that
individual decides to conduct themselves or dress, that’s still a person. And,
you’re walking down the hallway and people are saying stuff and throwing stuff at you. It made me rethink the entire situation. If this person speaks to me, why am I going to turn my head and act like I didn’t hear them? That doesn’t make any sense.

“But who Would Join?”

The institution from which Thompson graduated did not have any formal organizations or outlets in place for its gay student population. Thompson expressed his feelings about the lack of a gay student organization.

We didn’t have a gay student group on campus. This kind of goes back to the whole stigma of the Black community and the church. You can have the women’s committee, the men’s committee, but you will not see an LGBT committee at an HBCU. If there is, I am amazed. The wild thing about it is that I remember a friend of mine went to a different HBCU, and he was saying that at any given time the some members of the football team would have sex with guys. I’m confident none of them would be part of the LGBT committee in school. It’s not that they’re not there, but who would join it? You can be the most flamboyant…I’m sure the drag queen we had at school wouldn’t be on the LGBT committee or anything like that in school. I don’t think schools are ready for that, not the HBCU; they’re not prepared for something of that nature because of the Black community, the attitudes. Every HBCU that I’ve come into is affiliated with some religion. Due to the fact that the Black church can’t accept homosexuality at this point, there is no way in the world it is going to get into our
schools. I just don’t see that happening, not anytime soon. I can see people being confident enough to try to start one, but for it to be officially approved, I doubt it. You still have a lot of immature people who are not ready for that…those committees, those clubs, those scholarships; I just don’t see anything like that happening. It’s sad to say.

Support Through Friendship and Spirituality

Thompson identified his friendship circle as being his support system while he was in college. Since coming out and being in college, Thompson reflected on his growth and spirituality in relation to his life and his relationship with his family.

My friends. My friends have been a support system for me. Because give or take, that’s all we had down there. We were in the middle of nowhere. Everyone was away from home. This was not a time of cell phones. We didn’t have cell phones. Nine times out of ten, our phones in our dorm rooms didn’t work (laughter) and so, um…it was like we were disconnected from the world, really, literally speaking. I had a very traumatic experience (a horrible car accident) that happened during undergrad, and that caused me to re-evaluate my life. For that reason, it’s made me learn to appreciate things a lot more, and realize that maybe I was an arrogant, cocky, bastard at the time (laughter). Maybe that’s the reason I’ve been given a second chance to re-evaluate some things. So, I think I’ve become a lot more spiritual, definitely. We’ve grown as a family. As I said before, I was so paranoid. That’s a good word to use. I was paranoid that they would know. Yet I never shared anything with them. Since then, they’ve become a part
of my life. You know, I don’t make an issue telling them about my life experiences, or having them participate in certain things and not feeling ashamed about it. And likewise, they don’t mind sharing with me various personal things in their lives as well, so, it’s worked out for the best. I don’t party as much. I’ve learned the importance of relationships and building bonds with people, which I don’t think I knew at that time. It’s a very important aspect of life. People always think it’s the material things. Of course, you develop a certain standard level of life and living, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But, material things are not the most important things in life. And going off to school, that’s what my goal was. It was a thing of, well, I can afford to do this, this, and this once I graduate. It wasn’t about the aspect of developing and getting an education, or experiences that I would gain from going off to school, and people I would meet, things that I would learn. It took me going to an HBCU and graduating, and seeing how I had evolved, both before I went, compared to coming out, that made me appreciate the whole process.

**Biggest Challenges at an HBCU**

Thompson discussed the challenges and the biggest hurdles that he experienced while a student at an HBCU.

When you go off to an HBCU, you have a lot going on, and that’s with anywhere, going off to any school whether you’re heterosexual, homosexual; whether you’re Black or White. You need to find out things that will help keep you in tact; things that will help or support, or an outlet, things of that nature because otherwise, you
will not be successful in any of your endeavors unless you realize those things to move you through, and things that are positive…finding acceptance…finding a support group…learning things that are of value to you. People go off to school, and they revel in things that they didn’t necessarily have access to when they were at home…whether that be food or sex or drugs or alcohol. And so, for that reason, you need to find a good support system. Find out what outlets are positive that you can turn to when things aren’t full of sunshine and peaches and cream. That’s a key aspect. People need to, especially as an African American homosexual, you need to find a support system. You will have those days when you feel like an outcast, no matter how straight you seem, or appear to be.

_Greatest Benefits of the HBCU_

Thompson described being both Black and gay at an HBCU as an “amazing task.” He enjoyed being a part of a tradition and an institution “known for producing educated African Americans.” He smiled widely as he credited the HBCU for many of his successes today.

I believe they do nurture people of color in ensuring the fact that even through trials and tribulations, whatever you may encounter in school that you will graduate. I believe in that so much. I believe in that so much that I forced my younger brother, literally forced to point that I put some clothes in the car, told him to jump in the car, and I literally left him at my alma mater (laughs). I forced him to go to an HBCU. And even though he left before finishing at that school, he still today claims that, “You know, I wish that I would have stayed there because I
would have graduated.” I told him that was the whole point of him going there. Again, they do nurture the students there, and believe in producing educated African Americans. They don’t have the same resources as some of the traditional (White) universities and colleges, they don’t have the same resources, but they do make the best of what they have. I went to an institution that cared for me, and thought of me as family. Even though you had your ins and outs with people, it was still family oriented, you felt cared for, it felt like you were at one continuous Black family reunion whether you want to believe it or not. And I know I wouldn’t be the person I am today without it. Those college experiences and things that I thought were the most horrible things in my life made me who I am…and made me appreciate not only what I’m doing today, but where I came from. I am thankful.

“I Think They Need to Provide Support”

Thompson highlighted many things that HBCUs could do to improve the quality of life and support for gay student populations on campus.

As far as today is concerned, having qualified people to sit down and listen, I think is a major thing. Provide counseling. I think that’s a major thing. I would love to say be more open-minded, be more accepting of gays and lesbians. That sounds good, but it’s not realistic. Not only that, but having people feeling comfortable enough that they can approach you with that situation, that’s a hard battle to fight. And, I’m thankful that I didn’t fight it until I was 22 or 23. I think fighting it at 18 or 19, it would have been a whole different struggle for me; and I
don’t know how successful I would have been at completing it. I only had two years left to go. That’s absolutely no time at all. Compared to you having that four to five year fight in front of you. I think they need to provide support. Again, I don’t necessarily think that HBCUs are going to offer clubs or seminars or conferences for GLBT students, but offering information or some type of support system is a major thing. I think it’s the first step in opening the doors in understanding their situation, especially in this day in age. I mean, I’m not expecting people to accept it. But, I think it’s all about finding information and education to at least give them a start. And me coming from an HBCU, I definitely recognize that. I remember guys on the basketball team at my alma mater, dating each other. They were dating each other. I would see them out at the (gay) club. We would go to the club in town, and I would be like, “Aren’t those the guys from..?” Yeah, and so, you know in a perfect world, one day, the same issues I have won’t be an issue for someone else.

“Choose it Carefully”

For Black gay men choosing to attend an HBCU, Thompson advised to choose the HBCU carefully. He felt fortunate to attend the HBCU that he chose despite the challenges facing gay students on its campus.

The HBCU that I chose worked out for me because it was close to home; it was close to my brother. It worked out for me because it was in the middle of nowhere. It led me no room to get into more trouble than I could have. So, I say when you’re looking at your HBCUs, choose it carefully and don’t base it around
what you think you want your college experience to be. Be open-minded. Get advice from older adults. You’ll think they are trying to run or rule your life, but they have some ideas of what’s going on. Look into the gay community at the school. If you identify yourself as gay and Black, you should probably see who else at school is, and see if you can get some insight into what their experience is.

Self Reflective Profile: Quentin

I traveled to a Northeastern city to meet with Quentin. Based upon our pre-interview interactions by both email and telephone, I was quite interested in meeting Quentin as he has accomplished quite a bit before age 30. He completed his bachelor’s degree in biology at an HBCU located on the East coast. He went on to obtain his Ph.D. from an Ivy League institution.

Quentin invited me as a guest in his home during my visit. He told me, “I know how expensive being a doctoral student can be. I will pick you up from the airport, and you can stay with me.” It was an offer that I could not refuse as it presented a priceless opportunity to visit with Quentin in his natural environment.

Upon arriving and waiting for Quentin, I took pleasure in people watching those arriving to and departing from airport. One can see a full range of emotional behavior by simply being a spectator at an airport. I saw tears of joy as people were welcomed home. I also saw tears of sorrow as people said goodbye to their loved ones. It was truly a moving experience as an observer.

Then, a champagne colored luxury vehicle arrived curbside before me. Sitting in the driver’s seat, a young African American man shouted through the passenger side
window, “Are you Obie?” I smiled, and immediately stood up as I knew that this man was Quentin. We had never met before, but there was something about him that was very familiar. It was like we were old friends reconnecting after years of not seeing one another.

During our commute from the airport to Quentin’s home, I learned that Quentin is in a committed and monogamous relationship. His partner is a White male, and they have been together for four years. Currently, the relationship is long-distance as their respective careers require them to be in different cities.

As we arrived to Quentin’s apartment, I was immediately enamored with the neighborhood. His neighborhood consisted of a series of beautiful brownstone buildings standing tall, side by side, each one different from the next in some way, shape, or form. Some were freestanding homes. Others were duplexes. And, still others were multi-unit apartments. Quentin’s was a duplex. Upon entering his apartment, I looked over to my right, and saw two books of poetry laying on his dining room table; one by Audre Lorde, the other by Jill Scott. Then, as I looked to my left, and walked into his living room, I saw mounds of music on vinyl. I saw balls of yarn and knitting needles. Quentin enjoys knitting as a pastime. I saw books on fashion. There was no television, no cable. In fact, Quentin and I listened to national public radio (NPR) the morning of my departure as we enjoyed an incredible breakfast (craisin waffles and egg casserole) that Quentin made for us.
As we made ourselves comfortable on his cozy sofa, Quentin and I finally managed to sit down for our interview. We completed the interview on the first night of my visit, taking breaks when needed.

Growing up in Predominantly Black Surroundings

Growing up in a predominantly Black city in the Midwest, Quentin described his upbringing as being mostly positive. He had fond memories of his childhood in terms of how he was taught to take pride in being Black. Quentin smiled widely and somewhat shyly as he reflected on these memories of childhood.

You know, I grew up in a city which is 95% Black. So, I never really felt different, but I don’t know if I had any race consciousness until I got to college. I feel like was never…I feel like I wasn’t discriminated against because of my race. I take that as a very positive experience, growing up; I never was discriminated against, or felt racism because everyone around me was Black. My teachers were, I guess a mixture of Black and White, actually. They were working in an all Black school system in the Black community. I didn’t feel discrimination. I never felt that I couldn’t do what I wanted to do. I always felt supported. In terms of being a Black male, growing up, I had a positive experience. Yes, definitely positive. In my hometown, it’s like post ‘70s before people had gotten a political consciousness. So, every class was like Black history class, there was no Black history month. It was just like Black history all the time, a lot of Langston Hughes because that’s what they felt; they still feel is still healthy for students growing up in Black school districts. History wasn’t taught
like how I heard it was, like about White males. It was very much Harlem Renaissance, kings and queens of Africa, and I felt, I didn’t feel deprived about knowing about Black history.

“Everyone Is Telling Me That I’m not Like Everyone Else”

Quentin’s joyful demeanor shifted almost immediately though as he described the challenges that he has faced being a Black man in the Black community. Quentin was often teased for being “effeminate,” which affected how he communicated with other Black men. He mentioned not feeling these types of challenges in mainstream society.

Masculinity. Just having a very defined standard of what is masculine. So yes, I feel that experience is probably one of the most defining experiences of my youth…trying to understand where I fit in, not fitting in, but still existing. So, I’m me, I’m who I am, I am a Black male, but everyone is telling me, like certain peers, that I’m not like everyone else. I didn’t understand that. So, I guess in terms of vivid negative memories, I have those. Because from as early as I can remember, being in school where people didn’t react to me, I felt like they reacted to other people, and I never understood why because I was just myself, and I had no consciousness of being different. So my difference was masculinity, or being too effeminate, and I didn’t understand. And so, that was like really very early. I think my first memory was like first grade of being teased for being too effeminate. I attribute that to being a Black thing. I don’t know, it may not be. I grew up with all Black people. So, I don’t know if that would have been different if I were Asian or White. So, I sometimes hear that Black people are more
homophobic than White people. And I don’t necessarily agree with that now. I mean, there’s so much hate out there. Everybody has a lot of hate towards gay people, I feel. No one community dominates hate. I experienced a lot of it from Black people.

Going to an HBCU

Quentin chose to attend an HBCU because he “got a full scholarship.” He lived on campus during all four years of his academic career at this HBCU. He discussed why he chose that living arrangement and why he decided to attend an HBCU.

I didn’t have to be straight anymore. I felt like I could be a different person in college. Like, I could be who, it seemed possible to be gay. It seemed impossible to be gay (in my hometown). That’s why I needed to get away so badly because I felt like I couldn’t be who I was there because there was so much pressure to be straight. The pressure could have been coming from myself to change. There was an all male dorm for freshmen, where all freshmen lived. All freshmen males lived in one of two dorms. Then there was the all freshmen women dorm. I lived on campus the whole time. My scholarship paid for housing. So, I stayed on campus, and my friends and I made sure we were all in the same dorm, so we lived in the same dorm. It was an honor’s floor. They started having honors housing. The honors program started getting…the institution wanted to increase its reputation, increase its test scores, increase the incoming class, and increase the SAT scores for the incoming class. I had high SAT scores, so I got a scholarship. It was really just based on that.
Feelings of Same Sex Attraction

Quentin felt same sex attraction for as long as he could remember; but he also felt opposite sex attraction, and experimented sexually with females throughout his formative years. At age 18, he openly identified as being a Black gay man. He reflected on both the defining moment leading to his coming out, and the many messages that he received from members of the Black community regarding his sexuality.

Of course, I definitely felt signals too from culture. And, I had a girlfriend, so that was complicated. Having girlfriends wasn’t a cover. I was just doing at the time what I thought I was supposed to be doing. I was supposed to have a girlfriend. I was supposed to go to prom. I was supposed to be dating. I just…I was just doing what I thought I was supposed to be doing. I didn’t have the wherewithal to really search and be different; or I found the wherewithal, but I had to get away to do it. I couldn’t do it in my hometown. And I went to an HBCU, which was again, all Black, and the city in which it’s located, you know is more of a Black city. So, it wasn’t as much race, as much as I needed to be able to go where I didn’t have a history and create myself new or something basically, I guess, or be in the closet. Or, just go some place where I could be out, and then in the closet at home, which I was for my first two years. People have been calling me gay my whole life. I did not know what the word, “gay” meant until I was 15 or 16 years old. I did not even know what people were calling me. I didn’t know until I was 18, went away to college what it was to be gay. It was just years and years. I didn’t know what the word, “fag” meant you know, just other terms that I had no idea what they
meant my whole childhood. So, I didn’t know what gay meant. I knew it was negative. It was extremely hurtful. I knew what, I could only identify as being a “sissy.” And that didn’t have anything to do with my sexuality because I didn’t think of myself as sexually different. I didn’t know. How could I know what bi (sexual) was? I didn’t know what gay meant. I felt girly, like I was too girly. I don’t know, fag, sissy, maybe they’re all the same thing. To me then, fag just meant sissy, and sissy just meant that you hang out with women too much. That’s what everybody told me, other than my mom, who’s a single mom and I have a sister; and you hang out with women too much. So, I thought that was my problem. I hung out with women too much, and I adopted their mannerisms and I was just too girly, so everyone assumed I was gay. It was never like I had to be adopted into the community.

“I Was Very Out”

Quentin was open about his sexual orientation on campus. He discussed being a gay male and his interactions with other students while attending an HBCU.

I was very out; I was very, very out. I was part of the (unofficial) LGBT group. I wore skirts to class. I had a thing for long skirts, just with t-shirts, and sneakers. I wore hard candy (nail polish). It was the late ‘90s. You could do that kind of thing in the late ‘90s. It was the Clinton era. You can’t do that now. As soon as I got to college, gay people were coming out of the woodwork. People were finding me, lesbians and gay men, mostly lesbians. I have tons of friends who are lesbians. They were finding me. I wasn’t finding them. When I’d turn around, and
everyone that I knew was a lesbian. My coming out was really, they were pulling me out. They were like, “Come on come on, like what are you waiting for?” And then, I was bi for a semester, and they were like “Mmm hmm…(laughter).” And so, it was all very easy, it was just kind of inside. After my first semester, I had this group of friends, and the majority were lesbians. They were pretty positive. They were steps ahead of me in so many ways, in terms of coming out, in terms of social activism, in terms of being organized and getting through school. They were just a lot more…they were definitely a large part of my support system just in terms of keeping it all together when things got crazy, especially when I was doing drugs; because during this period, I was doing a lot of drugs. So, they were grounding. I’m still friends, all my college friends; I’m still friends with them today. The friend I had in high school, my sweetheart. I only talk to one person from college regularly. The rest, we keep in touch. We’re on good terms.

Getting in to fit in

Quentin also described his relationship with heterosexual Black students on this campus. In order to fit in with heterosexual Black men, Quentin found himself associating with the “wrong crowd,” and getting involved heavily with drugs and alcohol. There was a group I met later…I met through using drugs. The drugs friends kind of replaced my other friends. Like, I still lived in the dorms, and talked to my friends from freshman year, but junior year and senior year, I hung out with my drug buddies. They were straight Black males. I mean, I guess there was one that was my really good friend. You could have thought he was gay maybe, but he
wasn’t. He was kind of counter-culture, but I don’t think he was teased for being gay. We didn’t have that in common. We had the same interest in terms of music, clothes, and drugs. I sold drugs. To try to fit in, I tried to become like really bad. It was like, I’m going to go to college, I’m going to change myself over, I’m going to become bad. I didn’t want to be a fag anymore, a sissy anymore. I wanted to have a reputation that I made, like something that I could control. I wanted a bad reputation. For some reason, I thought drugs were the way to go. I thought if I sold weed, ecstasy pills, I could overcome this image of being soft. I could just feel like they didn’t have anything over me because they were hard. When I started doing cocaine, I was even closer to that circle. I wasn’t in the circle, but there’s a certain kind of person, kind of hard, who sells drugs. Or, when you’re doing and selling hard drugs, it gives you this kind of credibility. You’re doing business with them, you’re not a fag. I was still a fag, but my money was green. It made me feel like I was tough. I was dangerous. I was glamorous. It really got me nowhere. Trying to do that got me doing a lot of drugs.

Dating at an HBCU

Quentin talked about his dating experiences while at an HBCU. He highlighted how hyper masculinity exists in the Black gay community. He discussed feeling fortunate to meet and to establish friendships with a group of Black gay men during graduate study at his Ivy League institution.

I didn’t date a lot in college. I dated very little. I went on maybe four dates. I didn’t date, I didn’t do Internet hookups, I didn’t do random club, bathroom
hookups. I couldn’t find anybody. There was extremely high down low (DL). It was very frustrating. It was too DL. People wanted to date and be DL, but didn’t want to really be active in the gay community. I had a best friend, my main drug buddy, but he was straight, and it would really piss me off. And I had one of my main drinking buddies who was gay, but really in the closet, but didn’t want to date me, or have sex me. He would feel bad because he didn’t want to date anybody because he was still in the closet. I wonder whatever happened to him. I wanted to date him so bad. But all the guys I wanted were straight. I didn’t have any gay male friends until I got to graduate school. I did have a lot of straight Black male friends. Then I met a whole group of people, Black, queer boys while in grad school. That was my first time being in a circle, like a Black gay male circle. It was really fun. It was great. It was so great. I loved the circle because they did drag too. I never did drag. I never felt like I had to be anyone else. I don’t have to try so hard to be masculine. It was really great. It was really freeing…because even sometimes being in all gay surroundings, I can feel pressure to this day to be straight acting, and not understand it, usually in Black contexts. Like, I have to be more, like I can go to gay clubs in New York City, and I feel like have to be straighter there. I’m like, I’m in a gay club, I should feel more comfortable. I feel like I have to be more straight acting to be more attractive or something like that. I’m so glad I have a boyfriend now. I can go to a gay club and cut up. I can dance and not care at all about having to get a boy, or send out signals about what you’re into, because that gets more complicated when
people want to assign gender roles and sexual roles. That brings more pressure to be masculine.

**Being Harassed at an HBCU**

Quentin was a victim of both physical and verbal sexual harassment based on his gay identity while at an HBCU and an Ivy League institution. He detailed the harassment he encountered at the hands of presumed heterosexual Black men. Once again, tears filled his eyes as he described these terrible moments, but he did not release the tears from his eyes.

It was a certain set of people that I associate with violence, and being ready to jump someone at any second. I’ve experienced homophobia in the White community. I’ve experienced homophobia from frat boys, White frat boys (in graduate school). I’ve never experienced homophobia from frat boys at an HBCU. These frat boys at my graduate institution know what hate speech is, they know what that is, they know what they were doing. Not to say that the people at my HBCU didn’t. There’s definitely homophobia at my graduate institution. It’s less overt, I never felt like they were going to beat me up. No one beat me up at the HBCU, but they would just throw shit, which could be just as emotionally damaging, and rocks hurt, and I missed bottle twice (that was thrown at me). I heard someone say at my HBCU, “It was just a bottle.”

**Witnessing Harassment of Friends**

Quentin also detailed the verbal and physical harassment that he witnessed of friends who were gay or lesbian.
I do have a friend, who was a victim of violence. After I had graduated, he was still there; he was in a vicious gay bashing incident. It was vicious. He was hurt very badly. It was a hate crime. He’s very effeminate. Again, low class, violent people. My friend, a friend of mine was a very flamboyant lesbian. She had pink hair, like a flamboyant lesbian, very flamboyant dresser. She was one of my main friends. People used to leave notes on her door, “Dyke. Get the fuck out.” Some kind of incident happened. I don’t know how it happened. Her room got tore up. She was letting me know it was girls in her dorm. I don’t know if it was multiple people, the same people, but she always had incidences. A lot of people I knew were in the closet. Even the ones in the (unofficial) LGBT group met off-campus in the gay area. People were too afraid to meet on-campus. I don’t know if they were afraid of harassment, but they were definitely afraid of coming out, and being identified as gay.

**Dismissing Harassment**

Quentin discussed how he dismissed his own experiences with being harassed as a student at an HBCU. It was not until he shared these experiences with college friends that he realized the magnitude of the harassment.

I had been out for a long time, I wore skirts to class, and I was a crazy wild dresser. I was telling one friend of mine that people had thrown rocks at me. She was like, “They did what?” She was totally outraged. It wasn’t until after that I was like, “Yeah, that’s fucked up!” I should have called the police. I was so used to being abused, that it didn’t mean anything. Then I told another friend of mine,
who was gay, but he was really deep in the closet, and he wanted to get a group of people to go beat their ass. He couldn’t believe it. It was just amazing how much I had…I almost felt like, “I’m gay, so people are going to throw rocks at me, like, what can I do, this my life to bear because people don’t like gay people. I just have to deal with it.” I don’t feel that way anymore. I’d definitely be more willing to fight now. I have to be careful about that though. I think I’ve gotten angrier. I think I’m more militant. Even after getting older. There was a certain point, I’d gotten into so many fights, that I said, I’m never getting into anymore fights, and I never got into anymore fights. And, I was like, “Wow, I do have control over my life, I can always just walk away.” After years, I’m like, “Why am I walking away from this bullshit? I don’t want to deal with this bullshit.” I need to realize you can’t beat somebody into not hating you or respecting you.

Opening up to Family

Quentin began coming out to his family during his junior year of college. He came out to friends at the age of 18 in college, and felt those experiences facilitated his being able to come out to his family.

I came out to my family in my junior and senior year of college. I was 20. I came out to my mom during my first year of graduate school, so I had to be 22. I came out to my sister during graduation weekend. She was helping me clean up my dorm room, and to pick up some stuff. I walk in and see an old boyfriend who I hadn’t seen in years, two years. He was like the first guy I really dated. He comes up and gives me a hug. I was like, “Oh my God.” So, I was like, okay, I guess this
is going to come out. I told her and that winter after that, she was like you should tell her. And so, I told my mother and told my cousins, aunts. It’s good. It’s good. It’s interesting. I know how non-judgmental my family is. At the same time they assumed that I would be gay. So, it’s really strange. So, it’s almost like I didn’t really need to come out, but they wanted me to come out. But they wanted me to come out with the flag, and like the pink sweatshirt, and say, “I’m gay!” I didn’t understand. They wouldn’t let up. They were like, “Are you dating anyone? Are you still seeing your high school sweetheart?” Or, I heard from a cousin of mine who is a lot younger than I am, so we started hanging out when I came home, and he was like, “They would always talk about this, and that, and that you would be gay.” So, they always predicted that I would be gay, and I guess I lived up to that.

*I Never Told my Father*

Quentin’s biological father died before Quentin had the opportunity to come out to him. Quentin reflected that coming out to his father would not have been a pleasant experience.

My father was kind of absentee. He was always there, but he was always drunk. So, my parents split up. We went with my father every other weekend at his home when he could drive to pick us up. But, I saw him often. He was my cub scout master, he coached my little league baseball team. So, I saw him often, he was always drunk. I’m glad he died so that he didn’t have to find out, and I never had to tell him, which is sad. I laugh about it with my sister and my friends because it’s painful. A part of me is glad that he’s dead so that I do not have to have that
conversation. I have uncles who are younger who I’ve told. I have an uncle who is gay and who’s very much in the closet that I’ve come out to.

The Importance of Coming Out

Quentin stated, “Coming out…I needed to do it, I needed to say it.” His decision to come out allowed him more inner peace. He also learned that not all Black people are homophobic after coming out.

Some Black people are homophobic. But, some really are not. A lot are not. A lot just don’t care. Or a lot maybe like, if their daughter came home with a woman, would be like “Um,” but they would get over it. But there is just a certain type, that I put like with the lowest class type, that crosses socioeconomic groups, but it’s the kind of person that’s going to jump somebody. It’s a certain kind of group that would even come up with that kind of idea. I had a good relationship with professors, excellent, actually, especially in the biology department. I was like an activist. So, I had this button. My bag was covered; all you could see was button. I went into the biology department, and one of the secretaries said, “What does that button say, we’re here, we’re queer…do you know what that means? Do you know what that says? Have you accepted Jesus into your life?” And there were other people in the office. It was really strange. That was the only time I got that reaction. You could see the button, some of my professors knew. I didn’t talk about being gay. I don’t talk about being gay to this day. I’m like private, but not. So, if someone says, what are you doing this weekend? I’ll say to visit my partner, like gender ambiguity, just because, I don’t want people knowing my business. I
feel like I’ve been through enough. I wouldn’t say I come out to people. When I meet people, I try not to have any shame. I think that’s the line for me. I could never deny my existence or my partner’s existence. I couldn’t live with myself because no one else has to. No one else has to. No straight person has to deny their married. But, I don’t hold big discussions about being gay or being out at all. I guess to my coworkers now, I’m very much out, but I feel like I meet everyone else’s wife. Or, I’ve met everyone else’s husband. So, I feel like, I won’t hide who I am, or my partner. But, I don’t come out anymore.

Is it Possible to be Black and Gay?

Quentin discussed how his ethnic identity affected his decisions about coming out. He identified being taught that being a Black man was in contradiction with being a gay man.

There are contradictions because of the way gayness in Black males is defined. I want to say, there are no contradictions because I’m Black and gay, and male. It’s hard to reconcile those things. I guess being at a university, a Black university, you’re definitely around a lot of Black people. Okay, no one ever said to me at my HBCU, “Gay men aren’t really Black.” You definitely hear those radical Black politics, “Gayness isn’t Black, gayness was imported from White culture.” I associate that with the ‘60s and ‘70s. But you still hear that today. It still has a certain currency that Black people are only gay today because of White people. Gayness is White, as it’s defined, I can understand that, and that’s where the term same gender loving (SGL) comes from because gayness is defined as Whiteness,
but just that gayness is the same as same-sex attraction, yeah there is a contradiction, because that’s not supposed to be a part of our conversation. So, I think some Black people who I think would be allies because they are revolutionary or radical are homophobic because gay people represent colonization. Have I experienced that? Yes. I had an African American studies teacher, history teacher in high school who said that. I didn’t have professors in college say that. You probably would hear some of that garbage on college campuses, I’m sure. I didn’t hear it at my HBCU from professors. I heard it from students. No one said it to me, “Oh, you’re colonized,” but I’ve heard it in forums, like that idea being put out there by students. That’s why I think it’s a lot harder coming out to my father; I’d be a disappointing example of Black masculinity. There are problems I have coming out to men. There are problems I have, having friendships with Black men. I do have a problem having friendships with Black men. It takes a while before I’m comfortable being myself: Why would I want to hide being gay on the streets? It’s not just about violence. Part of it, the violence has led to shame, and the shame came before the violence ever did. Like, you’re not supposed to be gay because Black men are supposed to be this. And so, the violence kind of reinforced, or made me want to try to be straight acting.

Being Black and Gay in the Black Community

Quentin believed that most of his repression transpired at the hands of other men. He felt that women were more open and less judgmental. His relationships with women
were more positive because he felt that they did not judge a man as harshly for being effeminate. He reflected on being a Black gay man in the Black community.

It’s just macho. It’s just macho. It’s so much fucking macho. It’s socialized. It’s patriarchy, that’s what it is. You can say there’s so much violence that’s been done to Black communities that the community comes between us. So much violence in our community and so much violence done to our community. Why is the major form of artistic expression in the Black community hip-hop? Why is it? It’s just violent. It’s just violence. That’s why we relate so much to each other in terms of violence. It’s a violent culture we live in. It’s two wars going on. That of violence, state violence is definitely directed towards Black people in this country. I felt that, and I’m privileged! I have a Ph.D., and I’ve been on scholarship my whole life, and I felt state violence. I can only imagine the state violence that others felt. So you have patriarchy, and violence that’s directed at the community, that’s directed inward, and it creates this situation that’s bad for gay men. I don’t understand, or I do understand, it’s violence. I don’t understand why.
“I Had all These Negative Experiences Because I Was Feminine”

Quentin’s reflections as a Black gay man in the Black community center around the violence he encountered because of his sexual orientation. At times during these reflections, tears surfaced in his eyes, but he never released them.

I’ve experienced homophobia in the Black community. It was an inner struggle because, yeah, I had internalized, I had self hate. I was in the church as a child, as a teen, and in college I became an atheist, a staunch atheist, like very much, very bitter with the attitudes of church people. I felt very repressed, or not repressed, oppressed for all those years in the church and those messages. I had to work through all that. I’m working through years later, but then I was kind of angry. I didn’t realize it was homophobia until I learned what gayness was. Okay because, I learned what gayness was, and people thought that being gay was wrong. But the thing is no one could have possibly known that I was gay because I didn’t know I was gay. So, I experienced, I feel like I had all these negative experiences because I was feminine. It wasn’t my gayness. It wasn’t because I had a boyfriend and someone saw me walking down the street with my boyfriend and got pissed off, or I was kissing a man on the street. The transgressiveness was that I was a “sissy.” It wasn’t that I was gay. That’s how I think of it now. Now, I know there is a lot of hate. Maybe that’s the difference between Black and White communities. You can be feminine, and people talk about you behind your back. You know, if you’re effeminate in the Black community, you may really get beat up. And I’ve been in several fights. I’ve had stuff thrown at me when I was at the
HBCU, bottles out of cars, bottles out of windows, rocks. I’ve gotten in several fights in high school. I’ve gotten in fights in middle school too. I was angry in middle school. This teasing had built up over the years. I had taken it so long, and I didn’t want to take it anymore. So maybe, for five years I was teased really bad. I was really angry, I had adjustment problems, I was really angry. But, I was a good student, my teachers liked me. I wanted to fight all the time, but no one wanted to fight me because no one wanted to get beat up by a sissy. But the damage was already done; they could call me a sissy and run away, no one cared. I’d run after them, you know, so I don’t know. I’ve started some fights because I was so angry, then I’ve been attacked on the street as an adult. People feel that they can do whatever they want to you when you don’t fit the mold of what “masculinity” is. It’s interesting, I mean all these kids knew what gay was, what fag was, I didn’t. Maybe they did. Maybe they didn’t. I don’t know why talking with your hands (gesturing with hands while speaking) makes you a fag, necessarily. It just didn’t make sense to me. There’s just a lot of hate out there. But they’re kids. How do they pick that up? Where do they learn that? It’s just making me think about that. Where do they learn that language? You don’t hear ‘fag’ on TV. I’ve been called gay since third grade. I’ve been called ‘fag’ since fourth grade. I’ve been teased and called girly since first grade.

*Harassment in the Black Community*

Quentin was not only a victim of sexual harassment based upon his homosexual orientation at the HBCU, but he was also threatened in the Black community. Quentin
highlighted how he was both verbally and physically abused by Black men. Not only that, he sullenly described how his life was threatened because of his being a gay man.

But then, in my hometown, someone threatened to kill me if I didn’t move away from their truck. I was walking down the street, and they said, “We kill people like you here.” I had on evening gloves. I was walking to meet a friend at a club. This was in December, 2006. It never stops. They were drunk and harassing me. I was like, “He threatened to kill me, and I don’t have anything on me right now.” I don’t want to be on trial for shooting somebody. I really do get that angry, angry and afraid. I’m afraid, but I wonder what I’d do in anger. I don’t think I could shoot someone. I don’t want to go there, but I feel very afraid too. Why do I feel this way? Because people are threatening to kill me. It just never stops. I’m 28 now, and it’s the constant threats of physical violence. And, if you try to protect yourself, or have some self respect, that’s when the violence comes in. I remember getting into a fight. I remember hitting a person who was teasing me. He went and got all his friends and cousins, and they jumped me. I don’t know if that’s common or not, but you can’t even protect yourself without people getting angry. I got jumped twice. I got into a fight with this kid because he was teasing me. I got jumped twice by him and his cousins. This was in high school. I was not even out. There was no way they could say I was gay, and they were doing what God told them to do. People have said, “God kills fags.” There is no way that you could know I’m a fag. There is no possible way. So, you’re just beating me up for no reason at all, just because you feel like you can.
Comparing Homophobia in Black and Mainstream Communities

Quentin analyzed homophobia in both the Black community and mainstream White society. Hesitant to generalize, he identified the Black community as being more homophobic than majority White culture.

The Black community is more violent. There’s more violence. I don’t know why people threatened to beat me up. I don’t know. It’s a problem with Black masculinity. There’s a problem with violence in our community. The violence is rooted in violence. I hate to make generalizations. I only know my experience. I do know White gay people who were teased. But, in my experience, I was just a more natural victim because I was a sissy. But, someone was always getting jumped. It was just a violent…I was in a violent high school. Fighting was valorized. Violence was valorized. Ganging up on people was valorized. Like, you were supposed to jump, “We gon’ jump this nigga.” You were supposed to jump people. It was like expected. The third time I got jumped, that’s when I was a freshman in high school, and I had just come from a Catholic school, where people were like, I got into some fights, but it was more like vicious taunting. Then I had one year of being in public school and high school, and got jumped three times, but more fights. So, the third time I got jumped I was like, I’m not fighting anymore because you can never win. So I don’t know. People were just looking for a reason to fight. I don’t know if they didn’t like themselves, didn’t like each other. It was just violent for no reason, men and women. It was fights all the time. I went to Catholic school, and told my mother that I didn’t want to be
sheltered anymore. I wanted to go to this public school. It turned out to be the roughest public school in my hometown. It didn’t stop when I went to college though.

Encountering Racism in Mainstream Society

Quentin discussed experiences with racism in the White community, “both subtle, and not so subtle.” He reflected on specific events, and the pitch of his voice became higher, and the tone of his voice became angrier. He became more impassioned in his discussion, began to gesture more with his hands in a manner that complemented each word he spoke.

I feel like racism has come from places that I can’t even touch, like the police. I remember I was doing research at an experimental forest. This was my third and fourth years as an undergraduate. I was studying lime disease, and I was studying ticks because they carry lime disease. I was trapping ticks that summer. So, I was in a lot of forest patches alongside the road. I was basically detained by a sheriff. I was getting supplies out of my trunk, he pulled up behind me, he looked really afraid, really scared. I said, “Hello,” and went to put my supplies out into the field to trap overnight. I go into the forest, he follows me out there to see what I am doing, he sees me setting my insect traps. He leaves before me. I come back to my car, he pats me down, handcuffs me, and puts me in the back of his car, for no reason at all. Then, he takes my license, and runs my plates, and runs my license. Then other police officers show up. So, I’m handcuffed in the back of his car, other officers show up, and they’re just like having a conversation with me, like it
was the most normal thing in the world that I’m sitting in the back of the car. It was like, absolutely surreal. Like the other cops would show up, and they were acting so nice, “Oh, so what are you studying?” And we’re having this conversation about what I’m studying, but I’m in handcuffs in the back of this police car. And then, this sheriff took me to where I was staying. I was working with other students who were from different universities, who were all White, it was early in the morning. I did the trapping early in the morning, and so everyone was just getting up, having breakfast. And then the police then takes me to my house in handcuffs because I didn’t have my wallet. That’s what it was, I didn’t have my wallet because I had gotten up early to go set my traps before breakfast. So, he took me to the dorm to get the wallet, and everyone’s like, “Oh my God, what’s going on?” It was really humiliating. And this was right outside of, nearby the entrance to the research institute. And so, I’m handcuffed, and everyone’s coming to work at 7:30 in the morning. And then, okay, of course he looks at my record, he harasses me, and says, “Are you sure you’re not wanted? Are you sure you don’t have any arrests? Are you sure that car’s yours?” This is after running my plates, after taking me to the dormitory, after he sees me setting traps. Mind you, I’m in a one-piece body suit, to protect me from ticks, I’m like in field gear. And so after that, he lets me go, and then he drives around the institute and stops whoever at random, asking them do they know me, and starts just asking questions about me. And one of these people happened to be the director’s wife. And the director’s wife contacted the director, and the director contacted the
sheriff ‘cause his friend was a deputy. So, that was pretty bad. That was like the serious experience I’ve had. In terms of individuals, I felt I was in a very…if people were racist, I didn’t know it. They never said anything, and they were very professional. Everyone that I worked with as a grad student has been very professional. And, I haven’t had more than three or four experiences, and I can’t even remember all of them. I’ve been lucky. I have. I see a lot of injustice that angers me, but I feel like I’m sensitive to seeing a lot of injustice.

Changing to Comfort Others

Quentin was subjected to moving back and forth between different groups and various settings. He felt as though he had to switch his behavior in order to be more accepted by different groups.

I still feel like when I’m in a group of Black straight people, I censor myself in terms of how I think, how I act and how I talk about my personal life. I’ve gotten more conservative throughout my life, in different spaces. So, I don’t have clothes for different spaces anymore. Like, I did in undergrad, for instance. Like, beginning of grad school, I’ve become a lot more conservative so that it is more seamless moving from work to my neighborhood. I carry my murse (man + purse); it’s like a lunch bag, really. I do get some looks every once in a while, like definitely, I’ve gotten a couple of looks. I did say earlier that I would never, if the moment called for it, I would never say that I don’t have a partner. But that’s actually not true. I do just say nothing. In some situations, I’ve learned that especially in male situations and Black male situations, just not to say anything at
all, in terms of my personal life. You know people think I’m coming on to them. I just don’t want to deal with the bullshit. I don’t want to deal with it. Like, I’m very cognizant of it, like over-cognizant of it that it makes me shake sometimes, like if I’m too close in proximity to straight men. Am I silenced? Yeah, I’m not being who I would be if I were totally comfortable. I don’t feel like I need to come out to them at the same time. I don’t feel the need to be like, “I’m gay…and I have a partner.” I don’t feel that I need to do that. It’s not…they haven’t said anything to me. It’s me. I’m just like, “I can’t hang around you all.” I just don’t ever want that to happen again.

Making the Transition

Quentin expressed being “so bad” at making the transition between different groups. He felt “stressed out,” and felt as though he “can’t deal” when it comes to switching his behavior.

I try all I want, and it doesn’t work. I guess the point is not that it doesn’t work, the point is trying I guess. So, yeah, it’s stressful. It’s totally stressful. It’s super stressful. It’s made me stressed (laughter)…a lot of anxiety to the point of not wanting to interact because I can’t be who I am. I can’t be like you want me to be in your circle; or be what you want me to be to not get noticed. I’m too noticeable for some reason, even if I don’t want to be. And then, yet and still, I still try. I think, “What didn’t work this time? Maybe I should do this, maybe I should do that.” Then I’m back to the training my aunt gave me on how to be less effeminate, my family trying to give me lessons on how to walk, how to move my
hands, how to speak, and what to say. I guess it’s homophobia, but it’s like I was
too girly. I don’t know what they thought. It’s just interesting because these
lessons for my whole life, and I’ve been teased my whole life. And so, if there’s
anything to be said for being born gay, you know I was definitely born gay. I
didn’t make a choice. Transitions are stress. You never know what the situation
will be so I always have to be guarded. Am I always guarded? No, because I’m
really bad at it. When I’m guarded, am I effective? Hell no. Never. I’m just now
getting comfortable with being who I am. I’m fucking 28 years old. After going
through this whole childhood. I should know by now that I can’t please anybody,
I just have to live with who I am. It’s hard to do that. I wish I didn’t have to do
the transitions. I wish society wasn’t the way it is. It’s really stressful. I need to
work on not letting it bother me so much. If I need to work on anything, it’s not
trying to be more straight, it’s not letting it bother me so much…being teased,
because it’s still teasing. It’s the same thing. It’s actually painful for me to say it’s
teasing because I associate that so much with childhood. I’ve been out for so long.
But, it’s teasing. And I’m like grown, very grown.

Supportive Friendships

Quentin’s friendship circles were his main support unit while attending an HBCU.
His friends made him aware that he was being verbally and physically harassed based
upon his sexual orientation. Quentin’s friends affirmed that his abusers were the problem,
and not Quentin.
My friends definitely were my support. After my first year, I was so out, that I didn’t need support anymore. Well, that’s not true because I had the whole rocks incident, and it was friends who pointed out to me how fucked up it was. So, my friends have been a lot of support. Like, they were an affirmation that the way I act is not the problem. They (the harassers) are the problem. I think I could have internalized a lot more self-hate, not could have, I would have internalized a lot more self-hate if I didn’t have the friends I had. I had internalized so much self hate because it was like, this is how I know oppression is so fucked up. It made me think that I was the problem. If only I could be different, then the abuser, in this case, Black males, would stop abusing me. Like, it’s my fault that I’m being abused, or that I’ve been abused all these years because I’m too feminine, and if I could only change, they would stop, and I would have their friendship and respect. Wanting to be different didn’t lead me anywhere, but closer to death. I have friends. I have friends. So, it was definitely my friends who gave me the courage to…gave me the support to find who I was through time coming out, and being out because that was also important. It was the HBCU experience, this great bunch of people.

Living With Authenticity

Since coming out and being in college, Quentin described his religious/spiritual beliefs. He also discussed his present social life and relationship with his family.

I was raised in a certain Christian tradition. But, I don’t believe that there is a thing called God manipulating something. I was atheist. Now, I’m agnostic. I feel
like I’m just…taking a harder line on some things, and a softer line on others. I’m
more of a relativist now. There cannot be a God. I still think that Christianity is
oppressive, and Judaism is far more oppressive, especially towards gay people. I
think homophobia is a subset of gender discrimination. Especially how I’ve
experienced homophobia. It’s definitely been about gender roles and fitting into
genders and gender transgression. I was talking to a friend of mine who is from
West Africa, and she was saying that it’s totally impossible, two women living
together; they would just be dragged or shot. Men can do it, because they can
have wives, can see each other, and can get away with it, and no one would really
know. I don’t know if God exists. I have some kind of spiritual relationship that I
developed since I was in a 12-step program (through alcoholics anonymous), and
that is a cornerstone in having a strong program when you’re in a 12-step
program, having a relationship with a higher power. It was stronger than what it is
now. I just, I don’t have faith in God. I wanted to believe, I just don’t have faith.
I’m willing to accept that a miracle happened in my life because I couldn’t have
imagined not drinking everyday, and now, I don’t drink. So, I have no idea, I
think that’s miraculous. I can’t believe that there’s a thing called “God” that’s
doing something for me. I just can’t believe it. I just don’t believe there is a God
basically. I think that praying, and especially prayers of gratitude keep me
grounded because there’s something about having anything that I know I haven’t
done for myself. So, I say prayers of gratitude daily because I know what I have is
not because of me in some way, but I kind of attribute it to a thing called, “God.”
I don’t know. But I feel fortunate, and that’s why I pray, but no church. I did a lot of drugs for a lot of years. I know people who’ve been doing crack for a long time. I did drugs from 18 to 20 something…it’s a long ass time. I have no brain now. My brain is flakes. Everyday was a party. When I got sober, I started training, started dancing. Started capoeira. Started working. That took up a lot of time; and, getting my degree. Writing my thesis…making progress and doing research, it took a lot of work to do my project. It was a serious task, like grad school, my Ph.D. It’s hard. My current boyfriend, it’s an honest relationship, so that’s definitely time. I was politically active in grad school. That changed after my father died. I changed after my father died. I wanted to reach out and be compassionate towards people. So, I became a hospice volunteer. I volunteered at the hospital. I trained capoeira, I danced every so often. I hung out with friends, went to dinner, or to the queer bar. I had a lot of secrets. I have no secrets today, and that feels great. It’s beautiful. It’s so beautiful. I talk to my family about being an alcoholic. I’ve told my boyfriend. I can just be who I am. I have a great relationship with my mom. Of course, I was worried about my stepfather, about what would happen when my boyfriend went to graduation, of course. My mother and stepfather were there. They just hung out, they talked, and it was fine. But I thought, “Oh gosh, what’s my stepfather going to do because he’s from the South?” You know, he’s from a different generation. I’m always worried about someone else. Is my gayness going to make someone else uncomfortable? My family, it’s fine. Like I said, my little sister is a lesbian. I have an older sister who
is a year older. And my little sister we’re loving, but not close. We talk about twice per year.

*Stopping the Violence*

Quentin revisited violence at the HBCU and in the Black community when he considered what HBCUs could do to improve the quality of life for gay Black students. I keep coming back to violence, and I don’t know why this is. Maybe because it’s so central to my experience. They don’t enshrine diversity. My HBCU itself doesn’t talk about the diversity within this Black community, and how important that diversity is because we’re all Black. It’s like this whole idea of Blackness. So, it itself engulfs everyone in this blanket of political Blackness. You know, we have the same interests, we have the same culture in a sense, well, you do have Diaspora studies. And so, it’s understanding the Diaspora, but we’re all Black. So, I feel because of that, they wouldn’t want to have a mechanism for people who are being beat up to talk about their experiences being beat up at an HBCU. A part of me wants that to happen, but it takes a lot of courage for a university to put in place a mechanism to deal with hate crimes because you have to acknowledge that you have this tension between different groups. But, that’s what they should do. Make it known to students. But they act like discrimination can’t happen on that campus. Because we’re all Black, you can’t be discriminated against? Totally blind to the violence because we keep it silent. We don’t stand up for our rights. I didn’t stand up for my rights. I didn’t know I had rights until I went to graduate school. I was so ashamed. Now, if I went back, I’d be in the dean’s office, I’d
call the police. I wish there was more outreach. It would be great if there was LGBT outreach. I think students can create that for themselves because the university isn’t going to do that unfortunately. Anything that subverses, students have to push. We’re not there yet, because we’re so violent. They make you go through orientation, you never hear about it. They tell you about drugs, they tell you about guns, but they don’t tell you about fights. They don’t tell you not to beat people up. It’s as if that is tacitly accepted. And, maybe they wouldn’t agree with that. I wish they would say, “If you feel unsafe, then…” I can just imagine the many circumstances where any student, not just gay students, but any student who feels they are being discriminated against for any reason should feel like they have a place to go.

Measure of Success

Quentin felt that he gained success by hitting a “high bottom.” This fall from grace presented an opportunity for him to reassess his life, to quit drinking and using drugs. He found love for himself and others, and became more responsible in his personal life. These significant moments happened for Quentin at an HBCU. He also described additional rewards being both Black and gay at an HBCU.

I think one of the biggest rewards is constantly being able to think freely. Since I was never able to fit in, I knew there was something outside of fitting in. And so, I talked earlier about consumerism and consumption, I fall into that pattern. It’s helped me to see that there is more to life than fitting in. I don’t have to be one in the crowd of someone else. I’ve had so many sanctions that it’s like, I almost
don’t worry about fitting in. It’s allowed me to be more different, to be bolder than a lot of people would be. I’m becoming more conservative. It’s true. I was really rebellious, really out there when I was in college. I’ve become more conservative. I’ve made some concessions. So, I think that’s the biggest thing for me. It’s okay to be different. I spent a lot of time trying to fit in. Being ostracized, you learn something different about life than if you’re accepted. And so, if you constantly go along with the flow, like I understand subversiveness, transgression, rebellion. And I’m finally being able to be rebellious in a way that my actions actually do people in the world some good, hopefully. I can really be revolutionary like Dr. King, civil disobedience. I think being a beat up gay Black male, it makes it harder and easier in some ways to be a radical, to have radical politics. I’m trying to go beyond reading radical politics, and actually being radical. But, it can be good and bad. If you get beat up a lot, it can make you shy and quiet. For me, I’m like, “Oh well, I’m going to get beat up anyway.” It’s easier for me to be radical, I feel, than somebody else who has everything to lose because they always fit in. I’ve never fit in. I don’t feel I have people’s respect to lose. I think I identify with women, I identify with other oppressed groups. I have compassion. I feel a lot more, I can see how our society structures sexuality, structures gender, structures racism because it’s all been done on my body, and done to my mind. Because everything has been so hard, I’ve had to search for answers to just be okay with who I am. And those answers, I can relate to people, relate to justice, and see things that people may not see. That’s been great. It has. I
mean, I don’t know if that’s saying I have some kind of knowledge. I think I do from being Black and gay. I think it’s given me some knowledge about the world.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the self-reflective profiles of the four research participants in this study, Zion, N’diol, Thompson, and Quentin. I began with a review of how I identified and selected the participants. Then, I discussed the building of each participant’s self-reflections from the interview transcripts. Lastly, the self-reflective profiles of each participant were presented.
CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter contains my analysis of the reflections of the research participants. It includes the central themes and sub-themes found in the experiences of the four men in this study as developed from the interview transcripts of each research participant. The reflections provided information about the meaning they placed on their lives as Black gay men in various communities, especially the HBCU community.

Determining the Themes from the Interview data

Phenomenology involves the in-depth exploration of people’s experiences and the meaning and interpretation that they place on those experiences. The primary goal is to discover the essence of the phenomenon (Cresswell, 1998; Grbich, 2007, Patton, 2002, Van Manen, 1990). This requires analyzing the data, which goes beyond merely reporting the experiences of the men of this study.

In conducting a phenomenological analysis of the interview transcripts, I utilized a combination of methods to undertake a form of thematic analysis as described by Grbich (2007). I transcribed the audio recording of each interview, and then sent each participant a copy of his transcript, including my interview notes, for his review. I engaged in the habit of reading and re-reading the transcripts often in order to identify categories and subcategories of meaning related to the research question.

Within each category or subcategory, I highlighted and isolated themes and experiences occurring in the transcripts. Each theme represented a unit of meaning. There
were meaning units that consisted of single phrases. Then, there were meaning units that consisted of many phrases. I wrote copious notes about these units. I also maintained a researcher journal in order to keep record of my thoughts in relation to my research questions and the participants’ responses. Both my notes and personal reflections aided in the process of theme building.

To be sure that emerging themes were truly coming from the text, I contacted each interview participant, and conducted member checks. Conducting member checks aided in the selection of themes that were central to the experiences of the participants. Member checks allow research participants to aid in the review and clarification of their respective transcripts, thus increasing confirmability and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After reviewing their responses and my notes, they were able to verify the accuracy of their transcripts, which aided in my understanding of their respective experiences.

After I conducted member checks, I ranked the emerging themes and sub-themes, based on frequency and intensity. Additionally, I was also able to delete, add, or adjust emphasis on other themes. The research participants shared deeply personal events and portions of their lives as Black gay men at HBCUs. They reminisced about and described their respective experiences while students at various HBCUs.

The Themes of the Participants’ Reflections

Each participant identified numerous challenges and hardships while a student at an HBCU. Each participant also identified numerous rewards and benefits of attending an HBCU. In the following sections of this chapter, the research participants’ experiences at
an HBCU are discussed through eight main themes of this study. Each theme had a series of sub-themes.

*Deciding to attend an HBCU*

This chapter begins with a discussion of the participants’ college experiences as both scholarship recipients and on-campus residents. “Being part of the Black experience” was a key component in each participant’s decision to attend an HBCU.

*Coming out at an HBCU*

Coming out at an HBCU was significant for each participant. The sub-themes that emerged included: coming out to self, coming out to others at the college, coming out to women, coming out to men, and coming out to mother. A few of the participants assumed that others “already knew” they were gay prior to coming out.

*Witnessing Harassment and Homophobia during the College Years*

A number of sub-themes emerged in this section. First, the ability to “pass” for heterosexual was highlighted. Next, physical violence linked to the participants’ gay orientation was discussed. The remaining sub-themes included witnessing homophobia of: fraternity members, friends, college authorities, and a family member.

*Being a Black Gay male in the Black Community*

“Black masculinity” and being called, “faggot” were among the sub-themes explored in this section. “Acting White” instead of “acting Black” was also highlighted. The participants also reflected on: having multiple identities, the projections of Black gay people in the media, and the pressure to remain silent about their sexual orientation.

Finally, the notion that not all Black people are homophobic was discussed.
Being Black and Gay in Mainstream Society

The research participants identified three sub-themes in this section which included: experiencing racism in mainstream communities as Black men, finding acceptance in mainstream communities as gay men, and having no interest in participating in mainstream communities as Black gay men.

Coping Strategies

Internalizing homophobia was the main strategy that participants employed in order to cope with heterosexism and homophobia. The sub-themes of this section included: dismissing and ignoring both physical and verbal abuse, acting homophobic toward “effeminate” gay men, switching behavior to fit in predominantly heterosexual settings, and proving self to others.

Significance of Attending an HBCU

The research participants found support through friendships and religious and spiritual connection. The participants also reflected on life after attending an HBCU, which included: pursuing graduate studies, career attainment and aspirations, being part of a tradition, and giving back to the community.

Summing up the HBCU experience

The chapter concludes with the participants’ answers to the question, “How would you describe your experience at an HBCU in three words?” Feeling “proud,” “triumphant,” and part of a “tribe” were highlighted in this section. The HBCU experience was also described as “powerful,” “unconventional,” and “nurturing.”
Deciding to Attend an HBCU

The participants of this study did not hesitate to attend an HBCU. The question for each participant was not whether to go to an HBCU, but which HBCU would be the best for him. Each participant felt that he chose the best possible HBCU and stated that his experiences could not have been duplicated at another institution. Their academic skills and social skills grew, and attending an HBCU was critical to both the development of the research participants’ racial/ethnic and sexual orientation identities. Attending an HBCU helped each participant grow more comfortable in his skin as a Black gay male.

The College Experience

*Attending on scholarship.* Most of the research participants received an academic scholarship to attend an HBCU. This aspect was key in Quentin’s decision to attend his HBCU.

I got a really good scholarship, and that was basically it. I applied to another HBCU and they offered me a partial scholarship; but my HBCU offered me a full scholarship, so I went there.

Thompson had a few HBCUs in mind that he wanted to attend, but affordability was an issue. He quipped that he did not realize that his “parents needed to be millionaires to go [to one of his choices]” because the institution was very expensive. He talked about his choice, and how having his brother nearby at a PWI was an extra incentive.

I never thought I would end up at the school I went to. At the time, it worked out really well due to the fact that I graduated from a community college, and headed
to the HBCU that following fall. There was a package offered to me from my
HBCU. Not only that, but my brother was less than 30 minutes away. Now that I
look back on it, it was a really good thing.

Zion also reflected on growing up in a community in which attending an HBCU
was the standard, “All of my football coaches graduated from an HBCU. All the teachers
or most of the Black teachers in my life went to an HBCU. That made the interest high.”

Zion was courted by his HBCU when he was in high school. He attended a
summer camp offered by the institution during his freshman year. Then, as he prepared to
apply to colleges during his senior year of high school, the HBCU

offered me money, and offered me another summer program that I would come
down, that I would get paid for, and I would get a scholarship in the fall; and I
would receive credit hours while I was down there during the summer. So, the
package deal was wonderful. And so, I went just for all those reasons.

Living on campus. All of the research participants of this study lived on campus
for at least one year. Thompson transferred to an HBCU after completing an associate’s
degree at a community college. He lived on campus for one year because he “wanted the
full college experience.”
The remaining research participants, N’diol, Quentin, and Zion lived on campus for all four years of their respective academic careers, and had similar reflections in terms of why they chose this particular living arrangement. All three men found living on campus to be a very rewarding and positive experience. Zion spoke about his experiences at length.

I recommend anybody who goes to any school, live on campus as long as possible. I just found it to be a better experience. There were too many issues with people I knew who moved off campus, you know, financial issues. My scholarship paid for everything. Why would I move off campus when I had everything paid for? I had three meals a day. Why would I move off-campus? So, I lived on campus all four years.

*Being part of the Black experience by going to an HBCU.* All of the participants grew up in predominantly Black neighborhoods, but the majority of them went to schools in which they were the only Black student, or one of few Black students in his classrooms. Each participant became more aware of racism as he aged. Coinciding with the major stages of racial/ethnic development (Cross, 1971, 1991, 1995; Jackson, 1976, 2001, Phinney, 1990), each participant eventually identified either wanting or having comfort with his ethnicity. Attending an HBCU aided in that effort.

Thompson said that he was often teased by other Black children for speaking too properly, or for “acting White.” Choosing an HBCU meant gaining access to and establishing a deeper connection with the Black community. Although his parents urged
him to attend a PWI as they did, it was quite important and very personal for him to attend an HBCU.

In the Black community, saying that you’ve gone to an HBCU was prestigious. I wanted to experience the Black community in more detail. I wanted to feel that I was more African American than what I really was. I felt like I was the White boy. I thought going to an HBCU would help with that situation. I felt by going to the HBCU, I would get rid of that stigma.

Both N’diol and Zion enrolled in an HBCU because they wanted to be part of the “Black experience.” Like Thompson, they were expected to be the sole voice or representative for the entire Black race in the high school classroom setting. Zion grinned proudly as he spoke about being in an environment of many Black voices and perspectives.

I wanted to be a part of the Black experience. I wanted to be at an institution where I wasn’t the only Black person in a room talking from the Black perspective on a topic. I wanted to see how diverse the Black perspective was.

N’diol also smiled with pride as he expressed why an HBCU was the best choice for him. I just knew I wanted to go to an HBCU. I mean, I grew up around Black folks, but I went to school with White people. I wasn’t really getting the type of education I wanted in terms of history. I love Black people. I wanted to be around educated Black people.
Coming Out

Coming out as a gay man was a major event for each participant of this study, and it was a central part of his experience at his HBCU. The men knew that they were gay early in life, and assumed that others knew they were gay as well. Coming out to others occurred while they were in college; and it included telling their friends and family. Each participant’s style of coming out was mostly consistent with the major stage models of sexual orientation identity development (Cass, 1979, D’Augelli, 1994; Fassinger, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1998, Troiden, 1988); that is, feeling “different” in terms of his sexual attraction was something that each participant identified in his respective childhood. Each participant journeyed through his formative years in search of the answers or meaning of his same sex feelings, usually “coming out to himself” in the process. Each participant eventually came out to others as a gay man during his late teenage and early adulthood years.

Coming out to self

N’diol always felt that he was “different” as he felt same sex attraction as a little boy. He experimented sexually (light touching and petting) with girls and boys as a child. He reflected on these feelings and how he came to terms with his sexual orientation at a young age.

I just kinda knew that other boys were going through it, and that maybe they felt like it was wrong too. I can remember having crushes on girls, but I can remember having crushes on boys when I was younger too. I think my earliest boy crush was second or third grade. So, I remember that. I probably came out to
myself in junior high, probably sixth or seventh grade. I didn’t think it was right. I used to pray, cry, and stuff. I used to pray every night [for being gay to go away]. When I was in eleventh grade, maybe twelfth grade, somewhere around there is when I stopped that prayer because I was like, “This isn’t going nowhere,” and I was like, “This is it.” So, I was like 16 or 17 when I decided for a fact that this is what it is.

Thompson laughed out loud when he described his same sex attraction, and eventual coming to terms with his homosexual identity at a young age.

I’ve always known, from the time I was four years old, and my mother kept reprimanding me for wearing her high heels and make-up. There was never a question. I remember at eight, I remember I was going to have my birthday party and I went up to my bedroom. I prayed, “Okay, God, I just want to have one sexual experience with a man, and I’ll get married, and have some kids, and I won’t do it anymore.” I was eight! From 13 through 18, I was trying to hide so much…trying to disguise it and not let people know, which is hilarious now that I think about it. So, I’ve always known.

Zion recognized his feelings of same sex attraction “very early.” He spoke calmly about his same sex experiences as a child.

I knew I liked boys. I had messed (around) with boys. As a 10 year old, (I would be) hanging out with friends; the playing of house, or doctor (with other little boys)…us playing with girls, and then coming home, and playing with each other (same sex touching and petting)…the secrets.
Zion dated girls throughout his teenage years until he went to college. He was fully aware of his same sex attraction. He described the external pressures to have a girlfriend and the authenticity of those relationships.

There was some realness behind it (dating girls). I was attracted to them when I dated them. I loved one of the girls very much. There was an attraction there. I felt like this is what I should be doing. At the same time, I needed to keep a girlfriend, you know, you’re at the age when you should have a girl around. So, I had one for that purpose. I still hadn’t identified (as being gay). I was messing around with guys, but I had not necessarily identified. I was 17 or 18 when I identified, “Oh, this is what it is.”

Quentin said he was called “gay” his “whole life.” He was also called, “sissy” and “faggot” while growing up. He said that he did not understand the meaning of these terms until he was a teenager.

People have been calling me gay my whole life. I did not even know what people were calling me. I did not know what the word gay meant until I was 15 or 16 years old. I didn’t know what the word “fag” meant…other terms that I had no idea what they meant my whole childhood. I knew it was negative. It was extremely hurtful. I felt like I was too girly. I didn’t think of myself as sexually different.

Quentin had girlfriends throughout is teenage years. He felt that having a girlfriend was an expectation placed upon him by societal and environmental forces.
It wasn’t a cover. I was just doing at the time what I thought I was supposed to be doing. I was supposed to have a girlfriend. I was supposed to go to prom. I was supposed to be dating. I just, I was just doing what I thought I was supposed to be doing. I didn’t have the wherewithal to really search and be different. Or, I found the wherewithal, but I had to get away (from home) to do it.

Coming out to others at the college

All of the research participants of this study were in college when they came out to others as gay men. Going away to college provided each participant with time and space to cope and become more comfortable with his gay identity. Being away from their respective home environments, each participant felt a certain level of freedom to live openly as gay men. Coming out was more of an internal process for each participant, and when he felt comfortable with others, he disclosed his orientation.

Going off to college was a big event for Quentin because it meant that he did not have to hide his gay identity anymore. He rolled his eyes and sighed in relief when he described the freedom he felt to be himself in a new environment.

I felt like I could be a different person in college. I could be who…it seemed possible to be gay. I didn’t have to be straight anymore. It seemed impossible to be gay in my hometown. That’s why I needed to get away so badly because I felt like I couldn’t be who I was there because there was so much pressure to be straight.
Quentin felt fortunate to meet other Black students who were gay, both men and women. He discussed his coming out to others on campus. Smiles and laughter consumed him as he revisited his various coming out moments as a student at an HBCU.

They were finding me. I wasn’t finding them. As soon as I got to my HBCU, gay people were coming out of the woodwork. I’d turn around, and everyone I knew was a lesbian. My coming out was really; they were pulling me out (laughter)! They were like, “Come on, come on. What are you waiting for?” It was all very easy. I had this group of friends, lesbians and gay men, the majority were lesbians.

N’diol assumed that others automatically knew he was a gay man before ever disclosing his sexual orientation. He was surprised by the reactions he received from his friends (who were mostly heterosexual) when he disclosed his sexual orientation.

I was always under the assumption that people knew I was gay, so I never felt the need to try to pretend like I wasn’t. It wasn’t until later in my college years that I started to realize that when I was telling people I was gay, people were shocked that I was gay. That shocked me that they were shocked that I was gay. I told people when it was just too draining for them not to know. So, if they were my friends, I was like, “That’s crazy for them not to know.”

Thompson also assumed that people “automatically” knew that he was gay before disclosing his orientation on campus. He came out as a gay man a few years before he transferred to his HBCU at the age of 22. At the HBCU, Thompson’s coming out focused
on other gay students. Thompson identified the majority of his friends as being “males, African American, and gay.”

I always think (heterosexual) people automatically know that I’m gay. It was a spoken unspoken. It’s something I’m working through. Of course, for one to have gay friends, you have to come out to your gay friends. It (coming out) depended on the situation and how the person approached me. I was in my early 20s; I was very cocky and had a lot of attitude. So again, it would depend on how the person would approach me. Usually, what would happen was, like knew like.

Coming out has been “very important” for Zion. He thought about how coming out would impact the friendships he amassed while in college and beyond.

Each coming out experience has been very important. I’m still coming out to this day, at different levels with different people. Each coming out is important because it challenges the person that you come out to, to make a decision at that point; how they are going to react, how they are going to respond, not only at that moment, but later on when it counts.

Zion smiled broadly when he talked about specific moments when he came out to others on campus. He felt “fortunate” to have supportive friendships, both homosexual and heterosexual, and he described his coming out experiences as having been “generally positive.”

I don’t think I tell people until they are prepared to receive it. If they ask, then they are definitely prepared to receive it. Some of my male friends are straight guys from school, whom I can call on to this day from the organization that we
were in together. I came out to my best friend in that group, actually said the words (“I’m gay”), and then to another friend within that group. Those are two of my best friends to this day, along with the other heterosexual friends that I have.

**Coming out and gender differences**

Gender made a difference in the coming out experiences of the participants. N’diol, Thompson, and Zion were more comfortable coming out to other Black men, both heterosexual and homosexual, than to Black women. Quentin, on the other hand, felt more comfortable coming out to both homosexual and heterosexual Black women than to heterosexual Black men.

**Coming out to women.** Quentin felt more comfortable coming out to women. While he had friendships with male students who were heterosexual, he felt a high level of anxiety when making the decision whether or not to come out to them.

I had tons of friends who were lesbians. They were finding me. I hung around a lot of lesbians and straight women too. I had some straight male friends. I would get so uncomfortable with the presence of straight men, or straight men I don’t know. My gay friends were steps ahead of me in so many ways in terms of coming out. My coming out was easy…people were finding me.

**Coming out to men.** N’diol explained why it was “easier” for him to “tell his male friends than to tell his female friends” about his sexual orientation.

I’ve always been so close to girls. So, it seemed like it might have been a harder fall. Girls have been my angels my whole life. Girls used to fight for me growing up, you know what I mean? Girls used to really protect me. Like, I could handle
myself, but like, if a guy came trying to make trouble with me, and my female friend was standing there, she wouldn’t step back. She would get in their face and try to fight them. I’d have to pull her away. And they just take really good care of me. They were always like my queens, my princesses, my mothers, my sisters, and I felt like I had a stronger, or a more, more of an allegiance to them in some kinda way. A lot of girls told me that I would make a good husband, “Oh, you gon’ make such a good husband, such a good boyfriend, such a good father. Oh, I wish more guys were like you,” and they would tell me everything about themselves and their boyfriends, and they really respected me, you know what I mean? And so, I think that it would be difficult for me to be like, ‘Sorry, but I’m gay.” And I always felt like it would be a knife to their heart that another good Black man was gay. So, that’s taking another good Black man out of the market. I feel bad about that. I always felt like I was betraying my mother, my sister, my queen. So that’s why it’s always been more difficult to tell female friends or Black women in general even though that’s not my problem. But I feel like I’d be hurting them. I think for my female friends, it’s still an issue of them not having access to good Black men. Not that they all want to marry me…I feel like it kinda makes them feel like, “Damn, does this mean that all the good Black men are gay?”

Most of Thompson’s friends in college were African American gay men. He was explicit about coming out to other gay students because he assumed that heterosexual students knew that he was gay.
I really felt that if I had this don’t ask, don’t tell policy, no one would know. I did get away with that for a few months when I first got there. I won’t say no one knew, but it wasn’t a huge concern. Like knows like. The majority of my friends were males, African American, and gay. You have to come out to your gay friends. I thought everyone (else) knew.

Zion revealed his homosexual identity to the men in his social circle in college. He had very few friendships with women.

I had my gay group of friends. I was involved with my scholarship group. All the people in the scholarship group were heterosexual. I came out in that group. I didn’t do a lot of female friends. Even today, I have one or two.

*Coming out to mother.* Each participant came out to his mother while in college, and he expressed the importance of telling his mother that he was gay. Their mothers were the most significant person to whom they came out. This particular step in the coming out process is not highlighted in the stage models of sexual orientation development (Cass, 1979, D’Augelli, 1994; Fassinger, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1998, Troiden, 1988), which suggests cultural differences in the process for Black and White men.

N’diol came out to his mother during his sophomore year of college. Because he and his mom were “really close,” he felt like he was hiding a part of his life from her. It was painful to keep his gay identity a secret from his mother, as other parts of his life were not secret to her.
She’s just my momma. I just didn’t make sense for her not to know. I would be going through stuff, and wanted to talk to my mom about it, tell her, ask her advice about something, and it was just weird, her not knowing. Now that I think about it, it was completely ridiculous, but it’s what I was going through.

N’diol explained how he came out to his mother. His approach was unique in that he attempted to “soften the blow” so his mother would be less upset. Yet and still, it was an emotional situation for the pair of them after N’diol’s disclosure.

I went home one time during spring break, and we were having a great time. I talked to her. I was like, “Mom, I have a situation. I have a friend who is in love with me, and I don’t really know how to deal with that.” In my mind, I already knew how to deal with it, I already handled it, but this was my way to come out to my mother. So, I said, “I don’t really know how to deal with it. It’s not because he’s a guy because I’m really into guys. It’s just that he’s my friend, and I really don’t know how to handle this situation.” And she said, “Wait a minute, wait a minute, back up…now say that again.” I said, “Well, it’s not that he’s a guy. I’m really into guys. It’s just that I don’t know how to deal with this situation, he’s my friend, you know?” She said, “What did you mean? You into guys like that?” She was taking it in, and started asking questions like, “When did you know?”

She started crying. But she was crying ‘cause she said she felt like we had the type of relationship where she felt that I could tell her something like that, and that she was hurt that I may have been going through some things and I didn’t feel that I could come to her.
Zion made the decision to come out to his mother during freshman year. He reflected on his relationship with his mother since coming out and the importance of disclosing his sexual orientation to her.

She’s very comfortable with it. She’s met a lot of my friends who are gay, and who have significant others. She’s very comfortable. She’s very loving. Her first statement when I said it (“I’m gay”) was, “I’m going to love you anyway, no matter what.” I feel that my mother is loving. She relates well to me telling her I’m dating someone, and what I’m doing. I think that’s what hurts a lot of folks, the fact that they have not told their mother. Someone else told me this a long time ago, “Once you tell your mother, who gives a damn [about others knowing you are gay]?”

Quentin came out to his mother at 22 years of age, and defined this experience as his “second biggest coming out,” after his coming out to his small network of college friends at 19 years of age. Thompson was “forced” to come out to his mother at 19 years of age after his ex-boyfriend revealed Thompson’s sexual orientation to Thompson’s mother. As he looked back on that moment, Thompson stated that he felt “happy” that his ex-boyfriend did that, although he “thought it was the end of the world” at the time. He described his mother’s reaction after his gay identity was exposed to her.

When my mother found out, she was like, “I already knew anyway. I asked you about it, and you denied it. I already knew.” I didn’t feel bad for that reason. I was okay with it for that reason. She and I had a wonderful relationship. I could tell
her everything, and that’s the truth. Once my mother knew, there was never a question about what I was or what I was going to be.

Each participant highlighted how coming out to his mother made it easier for him to come out to others. The decision to come out was already a significant event for each participant. Coming out to his mother though was like of rite of passage. That is, once they disclosed their sexual orientation to their mothers, the participants were not as concerned about the negative reactions of others. Coming out to his mother enabled each participant to live more authentically as a Black gay man.

**Assuming that people already knew**

Each research participant assumed that those who were closest to him already knew that he was gay prior to his coming out, including his friends and his mother. The men also assumed that people in general knew that he was gay. Thompson “just assumed” that people knew that he was homosexual based upon stereotypes that he felt he embodied.

I never had a coming out process. I never had the whole, “Am I going to tell them now?” Somebody (my ex-boyfriend) told them for me. I always think people automatically know. I’m a decent looking guy, with no kids, and you never seen me with a woman. So, it kind of speaks for itself.

N’diol also expressed that he assumed others “just knew” that he was homosexual. He reflected on coming out, and expressed his dislike for coming out. He felt that the coming out images that he saw on television or read in books did not speak to his coming out experience as a Black gay man.
I was always under the assumption that people knew I was gay. They didn’t know. I don’t like coming out to people. That’s corny to me. I hate sitting somebody down and saying, “You know, I have something I need to tell you…”

The first time I did that, my friend, her mouth dropped. It hit the floor! So, I try to use examples (scenarios to lessen the shock). Some people you have to be explicit with because I think it’s a touchy subject. If you don’t come out and say, “This is the deal;” then they’re not going to get it.

Quentin thought he was supposed to have a scripted conversation with individuals to whom he decided to come out. He comically described going on a “coming out crusade” after disclosing his sexual orientation to his mother and other family members, whom he assumed already knew about his sexual identity.

I told my mother. It’s good. I know how non-judgmental my family is. At the same time, they assumed that I would be gay, so it’s almost like I didn’t really need to come out, but they wanted me to come out. After I came out, I did kind of come out like it was fun. So, I came out. I would tell my straight friends, “I’m gay. I hope you accept my lifestyle (speaking in an overly dramatic voice).” You know, kind of like a conversation you thought you were supposed to have, but no one cared? I thought you were supposed to have these big conversations. I’d see it on TV (laughter).

Zion found coming out to be a “very important” part of his life. However, he was careful about disclosing his sexual orientation. There was a certain level of trust and readiness that Zion needed to see in those whom he decided to come out. Like N’diol and
Thompson, Zion also assumed that people automatically knew he was gay based upon stereotypical attributes that he felt he personified.

I’m not big on disclosing unless I need to say it. So, disclosing would be based on how close we were, what we were talking about. I don’t think I was openly gay. I’m honestly gay. If you asked me, I’m going to tell you. If you bold enough, and have the right to ask me, then I’m bold enough to tell you. As the years progressed, you never seen me with a girl, and you seen me with more guys. I thought it became general knowledge.

Witnessing Harassment and Homophobia

Although the participants found safe spaces in which they felt liberated to live openly as gay men, they were not immune to verbal and physical abuse as a result of their gay identity.

*Harassment and Homophobia During the College Years*

Each male experienced and witnessed sexual harassment based on his sexual orientation. As “masculine” gay men, both N’diol and Thompson experienced low levels of sexual harassment, if any at all. Both of them witnessed the harassment of other homosexual students. Zion, who was “in the middle” in terms of his mannerisms was a victim of verbal harassment and scrutiny based on his gay identity. Quentin experienced the highest levels of sexual harassment. Quentin felt that he possessed more “effeminate” attributes. Fellow classmates verbally and physically assaulted him at his HBCU.

“I could pass.” Thompson witnessed the sexual harassment of other gay students, or students perceived to be gay. He recalled standing with a group of heterosexual males
who were harassing a gay student, and not coming to the gay student’s defense. He explained why he felt he was not harassed in college.

I’ve seen it (harassment of gay students) take place. You hear them whispering. It would be hilarious to me because I would be standing right there with them, and I’m looking like, “You guys know, you’ve seen me walk around with this guy (whom they were harassing),” and they’d whisper, “Look at this sissy over there.” I know a friend of mine would be called a “sissy” or “faggot.” I never got accused of that. So it is what it is. They (heterosexual males) had an interest in me because I could pass (exhibit stereotypical heterosexual behaviors). It was not like I was, “Hey fag” or anything like that (to them).

N’diol also described incidents in which he witnessed gay men, or men perceived to be gay being harassed by other students at an HBCU. As he reflected on these major incidents, the tone of his voice remained still and emotionless.

I remember one time, this guy, he was a work-study student in the financial aid office. It was a group of us. The work-study student was explaining the financial aid process to us. I guess one of the students in the group was getting frustrated or annoyed, and he called this guy (the work-study student) a faggot. He was like, “Fuck you faggot,” or something like that. They began to go back and forth, and the student in the group ripped up the work-study student’s paper. I can remember being around people, so called heterosexual folks, and somebody gay, or really effeminate acting would walk by, and they may say something under their breath, like “fucking faggot,” or “gay as nigga,” you know, that type of thing. Other than
that, nothing else that I know of, just little comments. I never saw anyone hit anyone or push anyone.

N’diol also described a situation in which a gay student was accused of sexually harassing others. Even though the student was disciplined for his actions, he was still victimized and threatened with physical abuse by heterosexual Black men in the aftermath.

I know one time there was this boy. I think he got kicked out of school because a lot of people were saying he was sexually harassing them, and he was harassing other students, and they would complain. I think he eventually got expelled. I remember one time some guys were making fun of him about that and they were like, “You can’t even go into a dorm anymore because you sexually harassing everybody, you fucking faggot. If you ever did some shit like that to me, I would beat your ass. I would fuck you up.” So, I remember that.

“I’ve had stuff thrown at me when I was at my HBCU.” Quentin endured verbal and physical harassment while attending his HBCU. He also discussed the incidents of sexual harassment toward other gay students that he witnessed on campus. Anger and frustration poured through his words.

No one beat me up at the HBCU, but they would just throw shit, which could be just as emotionally damaging. I’ve had stuff thrown at me when I was at my HBCU, bottles out of cars, bottles out of windows, rocks. I have a friend; he was in a vicious gay bashing incident. It was vicious. He was hurt very badly. Another friend of mine was a very flamboyant lesbian. People used to leave notes on her
door, “Dyke, get the fuck out.” I don’t know how it happened, but her room got tore up. She was letting me know it was girls in her dorm. I don’t know if it was multiple people, but she always had incidents. A lot of people I knew were in the closet. I don’t know if they were afraid of harassment, but they were definitely afraid of coming out, and being identified as gay.

Zion calmly recounted the incidents of sexual harassment that he suffered while he attended an HBCU. He was called names. It appeared that this harassment affected him more than his calm demeanor suggested as he repeatedly pin-pointed being a victim of “name-calling.”

I was in the public light at school, so name-calling was very much so rampant, “fag, faggot,” never physical, but name-calling was a part of it. Prank calls were a part of it. Was it disappointing at times? Sure. Name-calling, I think wherever I would have gone at the time, I would have had name-calling. It probably would have been the same issue with how I received name-calling, in passing by some stupid fool walking around.

Witnessing the homophobia of fraternity members. Most of the research participants discussed joining a fraternity while attending an HBCU. Quentin did not pledge because he felt it would be impossible to be accepted into a fraternity as a Black gay man, but Thompson and Zion pledged. It was a grueling process for them, and Zion was the only participant of this study to successfully “cross” to become a fraternity member while attending an HBCU.
Thompson reflected on his pledging process. It seemed that proving he could do it meant more than actually being a part of the fraternity.

The fraternity situation was kind of interesting. I look back on my early 20s and I realize that I was kind of cocky and very arrogant, which is something I’ve worked through. But, I knew I was needed in the fraternity. It was one of those situations that even if they didn’t want me, they knew they had to pick me up. I came from a legacy (my father is a member of the same fraternity). And so for that reason alone, they knew they had to do something, at least to get me through the pre-pledging process. Now if I didn’t make it through, it would have been due to something that I did. There was no way in the world I would have let them break me down. They were aware (that I was gay). I remember when I was going through the pre-pledging process, I had cornrows. They kept saying, “No one in our fraternity has long hair. What are you going to do with that?” It was an issue. It had nothing to do with my having cornrows, but that I had long hair. They didn’t call me a sissy, but I could tell that’s where they were going with it. Black fraternities are not welcoming of Black gay men. And due to the fact that I had no qualms or issues with what I was doing, it was hard to accept me, and I knew it. I knew that my pledging this fraternity would be a little more intense than my counterparts. I was aware of that, but I was still willing to go through the whole situation, more so, again, to prove myself, to show that I could do it.

I did not complete the pledging process. I had a car accident when I was going through the whole process. Um, the weekend when they started the official
pledging process, I was in the hospital, in a coma. When I came out, I found it to be in my best interest at that time. It was more of a choice of do I want to pledge for a fraternity or do I want to graduate from school. So, I chose the latter of the two. I thought I may be a little more successful if I graduated first, and then try the pledging process afterwards.

Zion was forced to admit or deny his gay orientation at a pre-pledging fraternity meeting. The rest of the road to becoming a member of a fraternity was met with quite a few challenges.

This particular chapter…a lot of their brothers was undercover (closeted gay men). And I looked at them, we were in a large classroom, and all of them were in the classroom, and all of them were in there spread out, and I was fielding questions left and right, and I forgot who asked the question, but I don’t think he was gay. Of the 30 members they had in there, 10 of them I knew were definitely gay, either by knowing someone directly that they had messed (around) with, or had encountered them in some way or form that I knew they were. So, they asked the question (“Are you gay?”), and I said, “Yes, next question (in a matter of fact tone).” So, that was a challenging moment in my life. I was a sophomore at that time. The vice-president of that fraternity came to my room, and we hadn’t talked all year. Like, we would walk by each other without speaking all that year. And he came and he said, “I never thought that you would say that. You didn’t have to say it.” I said, “I did have to say it. I had to say it for me. It was important that I said it at that moment, in that setting for me. It was important.” They were highly
pissed after I had left, that I just came in and told them like that, and said, “Yes, next question,” ’cause their faces were like, (makes shocking expression). They gave me about two more questions, and then I left after that.

Zion joined a different fraternity, which is the fraternity that he wanted to pledge all along. He went to the pre-pledging meeting of the first fraternity because it was known for attracting the “cream of the crop” as “they had all the leadership positions,” and this is where a student like Zion was “supposed” to be. But, Zion wanted to be with another fraternity, and during his senior year, he was accepted into that fraternity.

This fraternity took an interest in the friendships and company that Zion kept outside of the fraternity. The fraternity members took issue with Zion being seen around campus with openly gay students, or students who were perceived to be gay. Although Zion had a strictly professional relationship with another gay student leader on campus, he felt pressured by his fraternity to clarify the nature of that relationship.

I kept an association with him (another gay student leader)...because we were just so similar, wonderful conversations, intellectual, wonderful friendship all the way around. He’s a fem (effeminate) individual, but he had wonderful leadership qualities, and we brought him in (as my assistant) for his leadership ability and the things that he did. When I later joined my fraternity, they had issues with it. I remember them coming up to me and saying, “You need to disassociate yourself from him during this period of time.” The fraternity knew without asking. So they asked me. And, I did let them know he was working for me. He was my assistant, and that we were going to be around each other because he was working for me.
Falsely it had been put out there that we had a different type of relationship. I made sure to correct that. That’s not the kind of relationship we had. We had a great relationship.

*Witnessing the homophobia of friends.* N’diol described a situation that occurred after disclosing his sexual orientation to a “really close” heterosexual male friend while in college during his sophomore year.

We were like 19 years old, and he called me in the middle of the night one time. He was drunk, and he was going through a lot. He said, “Man you are my boy, you are my ace. I really respect you.” He was saying all these great things. I said, “What could I do to make you lose respect for me?” He said, “Man, if you started drinking, that would really hurt me, and I would lose respect for you because that’s one thing that I truly admire about you, your strength against drinking.” And I asked, “Is that it?” And he said, “Yeah, if you started drinking that would really tear me apart.” And so I asked, “Well, what if I was bisexual? What would you think about that?” Knowing good and well I ain’t bisexual, I don’t like girls. So anyway, he was like, “Are you?” And I said, “Yeah, I am.” He was like, “Man, I don’t care about that. You’re my boy. You’re my friend. You know, and don’t listen to what other people say ‘cause they’re not your real friends.” And he was saying all these great things. I was like, wow, that was easy. That felt really good. So a few days later after he sobered up, he called me and was telling me how he it really freaked him out, and he thought I was trying to come on to him, and he didn’t understand why I was gay, and he said he wouldn’t tell anybody. The next
thing I know, he told everyone, but it wasn’t like malicious. It wasn’t like, “Oh, he’s gay. He’s gay (whispering in evil tone)!” It was sort of like, “I think he was trying to hit on me. I can’t believe he’s gay.” It just got weird between us. He started trying to hook me up with girls. We really, really drifted apart. It was hurtful. But, it turned out to be a good thing because like 2 years later, he called me and apologized.

Zion had “generally positive” experiences coming out to his friends. He discussed a particular challenge that he encountered with a heterosexual male friend.

I do recall one bad experience because they responded negatively. We were on the bus traveling for something. He bumped into me, and kind of pushed off, and made a negative comment. I can’t really recall what he said, but I was hurt by it. I wrote him a letter because we were close. I said, “I was surprised to hear you say that. It was hurtful to hear you say that.” I don’t know what was said, it was kind of a push off like, “Ugh, get off of me.” And it was not like that. He fell on me. So, I told him that it was inappropriate and that I was shocked and surprised to hear him say that. I was hurt by it. He wrote me back, saying that he was sorry that he hurt me; that that was not his intention. We had a conversation around our letters, how those images that you put out are harmful to individuals, and that you have to be careful with what you say. We remained friends. This was freshman year of college.

Witnessing homophobia of authorities. Quentin recalled a situation in which a staff member within his major department questioned is sexual orientation.
I had a good relationship with professors, excellent actually, especially in the biology department. So, I had this button, my bag was covered, all you could see was buttons. I went into the biology department, and one of the secretaries said, “Does that button say, ‘we’re here, we’re queer?’ Do you know what that means? Do you know what that says? Have you accepted Jesus into your life?” There were other people in the office. It was really strange. That was the only time I got that reaction (from a college official).

Zion received advice from a college official regarding the type of people with whom he should associate on campus.

My junior year of college, one of my friends came to visit. We got up, and walked to get something to eat from the campus pit. Campus is dead. No one is really there during the summer. My scholarship advisor had seen me with him, and I didn’t know she had seen me with him. We were just going to the pit to get something to eat. It was closed, so we came back. But the next day, my [identifies organization] advisor called me to her office. She said, “Zion, when we go to conferences and other trips, I never ask you to do anything or go anywhere. I don’t ask you who comes to your room. That’s not my concern. But you need to careful with who you flaunt around this campus. As you move up in leadership positions and do different things, you need to be extremely careful about who you associate with on campus.” I said, “What are you talking about?” She said, “You know exactly what I am talking about…with whom you were walking that day.”

Who saw me? Nobody saw me. I really didn’t see anyone around me. It was
really funny. So, that was a funny experience. She was like, “I love you like a mother.” And, she did. She just wanted me to be careful because I had gone from being president of the [identifies organization] to being vice-president of [identifies organization]. So, that’s the level I was at during that point in time. So, she was just like, “As you move up, you want to be careful about what you do.”

Witnessing homophobia in a family member. Thompson has a close relationship with his younger brother. He revealed that he has learned to negotiate certain stereotypes that his younger brother may have about homosexual men.

He and I had this conversation. He said, “You know I’ve always been thankful that people that I am close with, I eventually tell them that my brother is gay. And they’re like, “No he’s not. You’re kidding me!” And he says, “I’ve always been proud to say you are my brother, and the fact that it’s not an issue that you are gay. Now I know there’s no one else here to tell you this at this point because momma’s gone (deceased), but you know you’re not allowed to wear panties (laughter)! I saw this guy and he had on some panties, and I wanted to let you know you can’t wear any panties!” Well, wearing panties has never been a goal of mine, so I thought that was too cute for words (laughter).

Summary of This Section

This section began with a discussion of phenomenological analysis. Next, the decision to attend an HBCU was discussed, including a conversation about the college experiences of each research participant. The coming out experiences of each participant was then highlighted. There were a number of sub-themes related to coming out that were
identified, including: coming out to self, coming out to others in college, and coming out to mother. Finally, this section discussed the research participants’ encounters with witnessing sexual harassment and homophobia during the college years.

Being a Black Gay Male in the Black Community

The participants discussed their experiences in the general Black community as Black gay men. Each participant reflected on the complexities and messages that he received about homosexuality and masculinity.

“Black Masculinity”

Each participant described feeling pressure by the general Black community as well as the HBCU to behave in overly masculine ways. They recognized this expectation at a very young age, and it played a major role throughout their lives.

Quentin described masculinity as being one of the most “defining experiences” of his youth. He recounted how he was challenged because he did not display the overly masculine attributes that were rewarded in his community.

Masculinity. Just having a very defined standard of what is masculine, trying to understand where I fit in, not fitting in, but still existing. So like, okay, I’m me, I’m who I am, I am a Black male, but everyone is telling me, like certain peers, that I’m not like everyone else. And like, I didn’t understand that. I had no consciousness of being different. So, my difference was my masculinity, or being too effeminate, and I didn’t understand. And so, that was like really very early. I think my first memory was like first grade of being teased for being too
effeminate. I attribute that to being a Black thing. It may not be. I grew up with all Black people.

Thompson discussed specific traits that Black men were expected to display. He felt that he could have fit these traits, however, he thought his appearance and other surface traits led others in the Black community to assume that he was gay.

[Black men] are very machismo, don’t cry, love sports, have a power belt, talk about women. Even to this day, I know there are things about me that don’t fall into the stereotypical guy thing. I don’t necessarily have a tool belt, all in the same breath, I think I still forecast all the same things that most Black men forecast. I think what gives me away is that I’m very manicured. My clothes match too well. I don’t have kids. I don’t talk about women. I’m extremely well educated, and no one’s ever seen me with a woman. It speaks for itself.

Zion received messages about the “masculine” Black man throughout his childhood. Masculinity was typified by certain behaviors and attitudes in his household and surrounding environment.

My stepfather was very much so masculine. My brothers were masculine. Being Black was very masculine. Being Black had a lot of pride associated with it. There were things you shouldn’t do or shouldn’t say. You shouldn’t have any feminine characteristics. I have been gay all my life. It was evident. I think they (my family) were trying to get me to go another way. I played football, basketball. I wrestled. I did those things for my enjoyment as well as to please them. The pressure to be masculine was challenging, but not a challenge to who I was.
N’diol reflected on the prevalence of a hyper-masculinized image in the Black community. He felt that part of this image entailed the demeaning of others who did not fit this particular image.

We have a plethora of issues that we are trying to deal with in the Black community. As Black men we have all these masculinity issues. I know that people feel that for you to be with another man is like, that’s like the stamp right there…that’s what makes you not a man. You know it’s very evident just the way we interact with each other. You know, we’ll call somebody a faggot, or if we’re referring to someone who is gay, we’ll bend our wrist, that type of thing. It’s always about being gay, or being a fagot, being a sissy, being a punk. The ultimate “man” gets all the ladies, gets all the females. That’s just always around us.

“I Felt Different”

Throughout their respective childhoods, all of the participants discussed how they were “different” from others. In this context, being different was defined as not subscribing to conventional traits or norms understood to be “masculine” in the community. Exhibiting masculine attributes led to rewards for the participants, while exhibiting stereotypical feminine traits or behaviors subjected them to hurtful teasing and ridicule.

*Being called a “faggot.”* Although N’diol played soccer with the other neighborhood boys, he also played jump rope and hopscotch with the little girls. He was
ridiculed for the latter. His voice softened when he talked about this experience, and he
looked downward to his hands, which were intertwined.

If I wanted to jump rope with the girls or play hopscotch, I would go do that. If I
wanted to play soccer or football, I would go do that. I could dance. I took
gymnastics. I had a lot of female friends. A lot of boys couldn’t understand that.
They would call me “faggot.” All the boys were asking me, “Do you like boys or
girls?” I don’t know when I knew faggot was something bad. I guess by time I
was being called a faggot, I knew that it hurt.

Quentin was also called, “faggot.” Like N’diol, he did not have a clear
understanding of what the word meant as a child, but he associated it with being the
opposite of masculine as opposed to an identifier of his sexual orientation.

I didn’t know what the word, “fag,” meant. I knew it was negative. It was
extremely hurtful. I could only identify it as being a “sissy,” and that didn’t have
anything to do with my sexuality. To me, back then fag meant sissy, and sissy just
meant that you hang out with women too much. So, I thought that was my
problem. I hung out with women too much, and I adopted their mannerisms, and I
was just too girly. So, everyone assumed I was gay.

“Acting White” instead of “acting Black”

Being different entailed not only the continuum of masculinity and femininity, but
also the perception of being different from other Black people. Each participant
expressed how he felt a sense of not belonging because of certain personality traits, or
educational achievements that ran counter to those of others in his particular community.
Zion encountered difficulties with other Black students prior to going to an HBCU because he was an honor student. This particular difference inspired him to attend an HBCU.

I was different from other kids because I was in the accelerated classes. My mannerisms were different. My affiliation with my mother was different. So, I didn’t focus on sports as my only thing. I didn’t dumb myself down to be accepted. So, that was different. I was one of two Black students in advance classes with a good friend of mine. That’s also why I went to an HBCU, to hear more of those Black voices in the class.

Thompson recounted being teased for talking “White,” and for the way that he carried himself in school. He laughed intermittently as he described these experiences.

I remember in school, everyone would laugh at me and kept asking me, “Where are you from? You have an accent. You think you’re better than everyone.” I remember at that time, I tried to change my dialect and my vocabulary because I thought I spoke too properly at that time. I felt like the White boy. Black people always think that I think I am better than, or that I am stuck up.

N’diol discussed how he was a “weirdo” who never really fit into any one particular group. Attending an HBCU opened his eyes to other Black people who were “like” him.

I knew a few types of Black people, and I never felt I fit into any of these groups. I just felt like a weirdo, and people used to call me a weirdo because I didn’t fit into that little box. I knew that I would be going to a place where I would meet
people who were like me because I knew the types of students they attracted. They were Black, but they didn’t necessarily fit into the confines of what mainstream was saying Black was.

*Valorizing violence*

Each participant discussed how harassment and violence was integral in his growing up as a Black gay man in the Black community. The communities of each participant, including his respective HBCU, encouraged having a “tough” or overly “macho” image.

Quentin woefully described defending himself from violence, which was “central” to his experiences as a Black gay man in the Black community.

I don’t know why people threatened to beat me up. It’s a problem with Black masculinity. There’s a problem with violence in our community. The violence is rooted in violence. I hate to make generalizations. I only know my experience. In my experience, I was just a more natural victim because I was a sissy. Someone was always getting jumped. Fighting was valorized. Ganging up on people was valorized. Like, you were supposed to jump people. It was expected. Like, you’re not supposed to be gay because Black men are supposed to be this, and if you try to protect yourself, or have some self-respect, that’s when violence comes in. I remember hitting a person because he was teasing me. He went and got all his friends and cousins, and they jumped me. And so, the violence kind of reinforced, or made me want to be straight acting.
Thompson described getting into a physical altercation with his younger brother after he called Thompson a “faggot.” Thompson felt that he had to resort to violence in order to prove that he was not weak.

Of course, I took that personally (being called a fag by my little brother). He and I got into it. You want to call me fag. I’m going to show you what a fag is like. But since then, he never called me a fag again.

Zion reflected on fights occurring in his community, and how being “tough” was an advantage for him.

I was struggling to be accepted, I guess. I wasn’t one of the most popular kids in the neighborhood. I had issues with friends, but I was tough. I’m only going to let you do so much and say so much. Fights would occur, but not around my situation, but just fights around the community.

**Having Multiple Identities**

The participants found little-to-no contradictions in being both a Black man and a gay man. When they considered the Black community’s stance on homosexuality, based on their respective experiences in that community, they identified several contradictions. Because masculinity was so heavily ingrained in their upbringing as Black men, the participants reflected on their decision to come out as gay men. Each participant mentioned how a gay identity was often depicted as being synonymous with Whiteness, weakness, and feminine attributes in the Black community. Being a Black man was tied to strength and pride. Making sense of their multiple identities therefore was important for the men of this study.
Black man + Gay man = contradiction? Reconciling his multiple identities as a Black gay male was a personal challenge for Quentin. He acknowledged feeling as though the Black community views homosexuality as being a “White issue.”

I want to say there are no contradictions because I am Black, gay, and male. There are contradictions because of the way gayness in Black males is defined. You definitely hear those radical Black politics, “Gayness isn’t Black. Gayness was imported from White culture.” Gayness is White, as it’s defined. I can understand that, and that’s where the term same-gender loving (SGL) comes from because gayness is defined as Whiteness. So, I think some Black people who would be allies because they are revolutionary or radical are homophobic because gay people represent colonization. That’s why I think it’s a lot harder coming out to my father. I’d be a disappointing example of Black masculinity.

Zion did not see “where being gay is White” because he accepts his identities as a Black man and a gay man.

I think you can look at being gay and being proud and being accepting as being White, a White standard, because that’s not how the Black community views it. If you do it (are gay), and we know that you do, you just need to be very quiet, in the closet about it. There shouldn’t be an honest discussion, and you shouldn’t admit that you are (gay). So, that might be where one could say that being gay is White. They’ve (White people) been a little more open probably than the Black community, and a little more accepting of it.
Thompson did not feel a contradiction in being a Black man and a gay man. He did not “think about” it.

It’s not like I just wake up and say, “I’m Black. I’m gay.” I guess it’s something that I don’t think about. And so for me, my life is my life. It’s not something that’s well processed and thought out. As far as being a Black gay male in the community today, I don’t things are necessarily perfect, but I think they’re a lot better than they were 10 years ago. People are a little more open to it.

N’diol was proud that he challenged stereotypes of masculinity and femininity in both heterosexual and homosexual communities, and felt no contradictions in being both gay and Black. However, he was taught that gayness was part of the White culture. This led him to question if it was possible to be both homosexual and Afrocentric.

My mother’s very Afrocentric, and she passed that onto us, which is great. I think I had issues with being both. I kinda felt like, can you really be Afrocentric and gay, do they go together? Not so much can you be masculine and gay, but can you be Afrocentric and proud of who you are as a Black gay man. I’ve always been told that it (gayness) is something we picked up from Europeans, that it’s not something that has ever really been part of our culture as African people. So, I used to have issues with that. The Afrocentric thinkers that I’ve always been exposed to, none of them were gay, or said they were gay. Then, I started to learn about certain leaders during the Civil Rights Movement, writers, all kinds of people who were very proud to be Black, proud of their heritage, and who were also gay, such as Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Bayard Rustin. So, when I
started learning, I thought, “Okay, you can.” But still a lot of Afrocentric folks will have you think that you can’t be that, and that it’s wrong.

*Media Projections of Black and Gay*

The participants discussed how the media portrayed Black gay people, especially Black gay men. They believed that this assisted the Black community associating homosexuality with White society and femininity.

Zion discussed how the media perpetuates homophobia and certain images of Black masculinity, and how these images are not constructive for the Black community. He named radio personalities who have “gay” characters on their shows. However, these characters are more caricatures as they “talk in a high-pitched voice,” or make stereotypical comments such as “Miss Thang.” Zion described these stereotypes as being destructive and hurtful to “the positive Black gay male who wants to do something positive in the Black community.”

Zion also deconstructed three distinct interviews recently conducted by a notable talk show host with men who became famous because of their personal accounts of living on the down low (DL). One of the guests on this show was a White male. The other guests were Black men.

(The talk show host) invited the White male onto the couch and very casually talked about his former relationship with his wife, his secret relationship with his (gay) lover, without ever saying anything about being DL. But when (the talk show host) brought the Black men on the show, (the host) grilled them about the DL culture and how it’s detrimental to the Black community. When actually, what
they are doing is the exact same thing as the White male (that was on the show). So, when you look at how (the host) treated the White male versus how she treated the Black males, that tells you there’s a major difference in how we look at it, and how mainstream media looks at Black gayness and White gayness; because all three of them are gay. DL is in both communities. It’s not limited to just one particular group of people. It crosses communities.

*A Spoken Unspoken*

Each participant stated that the Black community is able to tolerate gay people when they are not publicly open about their sexual orientation. They felt that their standing in the Black community could be elevated if they were silent about their gay identity, exemplified overly masculine behavior, and took on homophobic attitudes.

Thompson thought he thrived as a Black gay male in the Black community because he kept many facets of his gay identity undercover.

It’s a don’t ask, don’t tell policy for me. I really feel that way. It’s not that people don’t know already because it’s more than evident in the way I conduct myself. But I feel like I’m one of those guys where people say, “Well yeah, he’s gay, but he’s cool.” I’ve never had that issue where I feel like I’ve been stepped over due to the fact that I am gay, especially in the Black community.

N’diol said that he had mostly healthy relationships with heterosexuals as an openly gay man. Still, he felt that he had to keep quiet about some of the components of his gay identity.
The only thing that made me feel uncomfortable is that I never really felt like I could talk about my experiences like other people could. Like, we were sitting around in the cafeteria (at my HBCU), and some guys would be talking about girls (in a sexual manner), and I would either be quiet, or laugh, or make general statements because I couldn’t relate. Second of all, I couldn’t say, “Yeah, I met this dude at a party.” So, I did feel really stifled.

Zion felt that the stereotypes about Black gay men were problematic. He saw these images as influencing the Black community’s views on homosexuality. He linked tolerance of homosexuality in the Black community to the condition of silence of Black gay men.

The more and more that we get individuals who represent the entire spectrum of Black and gay, the more the Black community will accept it. Then and only then will we get acceptance from the Black community. It’s like going to church as a child. You go to church and everyone knows the musician is gay. But, the musician better not ever say he’s gay out loud. He should never say it to the entire church, even if the entire church knows the choir director is gay. If he says it, that eliminates him, and puts him in completely different light to the members of the church. He loses his status. That’s how you operate in any Black setting that’s predominantly straight.
Not all Black people Are Homophobic

All of the research participants recalled having both homosexual and heterosexual friendships. Through their friendships with heterosexuals, the research participants found that not all heterosexual Black people are homophobic.

Quentin was both physically and verbally harassed by heterosexual Black men from childhood to adulthood. In spite of it all, he was neither bitter nor resentful towards heterosexual people in general.

Some Black people are homophobic, but some really are not. A lot are not. A lot just don’t care. But there is just a certain type that I put with the lowest class type that crosses socioeconomic groups; it’s the kind of person that’s going to jump somebody. It’s a certain kind of group that would even come up with that kind of idea.

N’diol, who experienced more ridicule in childhood than in his adult life, shared in Quentin’s feelings about heterosexuals and their acceptance of homosexuals.

I don’t think in my life I’ve given people enough credit, particularly Black people. I think that most of us, we let situations and experiences with a few people, we let that I guess sort of obstruct our view of how people would respond to it (homosexuality). Some people really do have really bad experiences. I learned that I didn’t give people enough credit.

Summary of This Section

This section explored being Black and gay in the Black community. There were several sub-themes highlighted in this section. “Black masculinity” was discussed,
followed by a discussion of how each participant “felt different” growing up as gay men. Valorizing violence was then discussed. Next, having multiple identities was explored, followed by a discussion on the media projections of people who are Black and gay. Lastly, this section discussed how not all heterosexual Black people are homophobic.

Being Black and Gay in Mainstream Society

Each participant identified challenges as a Black gay man in mainstream society. The participants experienced racism in mainstream society as Black men. On the other hand, the participants identified mainstream society as being more accepting of homosexuality than the Black community. A few of the participants limited their involvement with mainstream communities as much as possible.

Racism in the Mainstream

Quentin said that he “definitely experienced racism in the White community.” He discussed being a victim of both “subtle and not so subtle” forms of racism. He described an incident in which he was racially profiled.

I was trapping ticks (for research purposes), so I was in a lot of forest patches alongside the road. I’m in a one-piece body suit; I’m in field gear. I was on the side of the road, walking into the forest. A sheriff basically detained me. He pulled up behind me, he looked really scared. I said, “Hello,” and went to put my supplies out into the field to trap overnight. I come back to my the car, he pats me down, handcuffs me, and puts me in the back of his car for no reason at all. Other officers show up, and they’re having a conversation with me, “Oh, so what are you studying?” I didn’t have my wallet, so he took me to the dorm to get my
wallet, and everyone’s like, “Oh my God, what’s going on?” It was really humiliating.

Thompson highlighted how a colleague of his was arrested for “some kind of robbery,” only to be released days later because he was “mistakenly identified.” He also reflected on feeling “invisible” in mainstream society.

They’ll (White people) let you know, “What in the hell are you doing here? We don’t want your kind here.” The light-skinned, dark-skinned thing is huge in my city [form of racism in which lighter complexioned African Americans are seen as less threatening than darker complexioned African Americans]. It’s like, “We’re going to pretend you’re not here.” I’m amazed that that still happens in 2007.

Acceptance in the Mainstream

Each participant felt that coming out in mainstream White society was easier than coming out in the Black community. Acceptance was the key difference between the two communities. According to the research participants, living as an openly gay man was more accepted by mainstream White society than the Black community.

Thompson discussed how being a Black gay male differed in mainstream society versus the Black community.

I don’t feel like I’m a Black gay male in White society. In mainstream White society, it’s okay because everyone is more accepting of it. There’s no question of, “Is it okay?” The Black community is a little different; just the way everyone was brought up in the Black community, the Black church especially is at the
forefront of how people think. I think it is easier in mainstream White society.
You have to work a little harder in the Black community to be accepted.

N’diol’s “effeminate” friend fled an all Black neighborhood in favor of a
predominantly White neighborhood in order to escape the harassment. N’diol expressed,
somewhat reservedly, that it was easier to be a Black gay male in mainstream society.

I have a friend who is pretty effeminate. He’s very intelligent. Very artistic. I can
do a lot of things because when I walk down the street (in a Black neighborhood)
people don’t look at me and say, “Oh, that’s a faggot. Look at that faggot.” But he
can just walk down the street (in the same neighborhood), be in plain clothes, not
doing anything, and people make remarks, people call him a “faggot,” and just all
sorts of things. He now lives in a White neighborhood and he’s very comfortable.
He doesn’t feel comfortable in Black neighborhoods, and that’s very valid
because White people are more accepting of gay Black people, I think. I think it is
easier for a Black gay man in mainstream society, kinda.

No Interest in the Mainstream

N’diol saw mainstream culture as defining “gay.” Although he viewed
mainstream society as being an easier environment to navigate as a Black gay male, he
also expressed that he didn’t feel comfortable socializing in mainstream communities.

I don’t really move in White society. I don’t really move in White gay society. So,
I don’t know. I don’t really move in those crowds. I would say that I feel different
from mainstream folks and mainstream Black folks. You gotta be a certain way.
You gotta look a certain way. You have to do this. It’s too much for me.
Zion was adamant that he felt little-to-no connection with mainstream heterosexual and homosexual communities, even though he was proud of his work with the mainstream gay organization, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC).

My experiences are very limited, intentionally. I just don’t tend to mix well. I’ve been intentioned when I do associate myself, but it’s not something that I tend to take advantage of. I’m just not attracted in any form. Not attracted to the music. Not attracted to the culture. Not attracted to the people. That just doesn’t attract me. In working with the HRC, I’ve volunteered with them a couple times, and it was a very healthy relationship I built with them. Most of the members were White, affluent, liberal. That was a good working relationship, but it also confirmed to me that this is not something I’d like to do. I want to help in my community because I know my community needs it more than their community. I need to support Black communities.

Summary of This Section

The men of this study lived a wide range of experiences in mainstream White society. They highlighted being victims of both blatant and covert forms of racism as Black men in mainstream communities. They felt more accepted in White society as gay men than in the Black community. That acceptance did not lead at least two of the research participants to be part of mainstream White communities.
Coping Strategies

Internalizing Homophobia

The participants of this study were both victims of and witnesses to sexual harassment based upon sexual orientation. Each participant expressed how he internalized homophobia and was culpable in the victimization of other homosexual students on campus. This homophobia manifested in many ways for each participant.

“"You can’t beat somebody into not hating you."” Quentin became visibly upset as he described how he saw abuse as mere by-product of being a Black gay man while attending an HBCU. He thought that he would have to accept the abuse as a part of his life.

I should say that I dismissed my own experience. I had been out for a long time. I was telling one friend of mine that people had thrown rocks at me. She was totally outraged. I was so used to being abused that it didn’t mean anything. It was just amazing how much I had, I almost felt like because I’m gay, people are going to throw rocks at me, and this is my life to bear because people don’t like gay people. I just have to deal with it. I had internalized so much self-hate. This is how I know oppression is fucked up. It made me think that I was the problem.

Zion took a position of silence when he was harassed and when he witnessed the harassment of others. Although “name-calling was very much so rampant,” he never reported his abuse or stood up to his abusers.

I never responded. It would be a person I was with who called someone a name, or a group that I was with at that time that called someone a name. So, I didn’t
address it. Those types of comments, it wasn’t something I could really address. You can’t beat the whole world up for saying a name. You can’t educate the whole world. You do it one person at a time in most cases. So, you just ignore it; don’t let it consume you.

Both Thompson and N’diol stated that they were not harassed in college, but witnessed the harassment of other gay, or perceived to be gay students on campus. N’diol recognized homophobia on his campus, and seemed to minimize the intensity of it.

I can remember being around people, and so-called heterosexual folks may say something under their breath like “fucking faggot,” you know, like that type of thing...just little comments. I never saw anyone hit anyone or push anyone. I knew there were homophobic people. I knew it was a homophobic atmosphere, but I think people got along pretty well.

**The effeminate is the other.** Thompson, N’diol, and Quentin indicated that they had absolutely no interest in becoming friends or associating with other gay men who exemplified any sort of blatant effeminate behavior. Thompson laughed as he recalled his reaction to arriving on the campus of his HBCU, and “spotting” a stereotypically flamboyant gay student.

I remember when I first started school there, and I remember there were individuals that I would look at, and I would tell myself, “I will never talk to that flaming queen (laughter)” because going to a Black college is like going to a Black church basically. You know, certain things are looked down upon, and that (homosexuality) was one of the main ones.
N’diol did not associate with openly gay students on campus because of his insecurity and need for privacy.

I have (dread) locks, I have a lot of facial hair, and sometimes with the way I dress, people sometimes even think I’m a Rasta. And so, if I’m gay, I don’t fit into what a gay man is supposed to be. And, especially if I’m Black, it’s like, “Dang, you’re supposed to be this way.” I didn’t really have any friends who were gay. I didn’t care to associate too much with the ones that I knew in fact were gay, I guess because of my own insecurities. I don’t know, I was pretty satisfied with my situation. I don’t think that I wanted to get a whole bunch of gay friends. I started going to gay (dance) clubs, and I would see people, and wanted to avoid them. I didn’t want them to think we were going to be best friends because we saw each other at the club. So, a lot of people thought I was cold, really mean. It wasn’t that I was closeted; I just didn’t run around telling everybody. So, I guess the challenges were, what if I’m with some associates, or people I’m really cool with (and who are heterosexual), and the gay boys come up and say something? How am I going to handle that situation? It wasn’t that I was closeted. I had to figure that out, or not be so insecure about it.

Zion also made a concerted effort to avoid gay men who were not conventionally masculine as defined by the Black community.

I think I did avoid other people who were extremely feminine for various reasons: 1. Because I didn’t get to know them, and that’s my fault. 2. Because I limited myself from knowing them because they were “fem (effeminate acting),” and I
was at a place and doing different things; and I like to keep my circle small. So, I didn’t associate with a lot of feminine guys.

*Switching behavior to fit in.* Each participant in this study felt the need to switch certain aspects of his behaviors and personality when entering different environments. This was especially true in predominantly Black settings, including the HBCU. The men discussed the complexities of adjusting their behaviors and mannerisms in order to fit in with the images of hyper-masculinity perceived in the Black community.

Quentin described how he switched his behavior in order to be accepted by others. The “transitioning” was “stressful” for him. He was visibly moved as he recounted these experiences, and he was animated in his discussion.

I still feel like when I’m in a Black group of straight people, I do censor myself more in terms of how I think, how I act, and how I talk about my personal life. I’ve learned that, especially in male situations and Black male situations just to not say anything at all in terms of my personal life. Am I silenced? Yeah, I’m not being who I would be if I were totally comfortable. I wish I didn’t have to do the transitions. You never know what the situation will be so I always have to be guarded. I wish society wasn’t the way it is. It’s really stressful. I need to work on not letting it bother me so much. If I need to work on anything, it’s not trying to be more “straight,” it’s not letting it bother me so much, being teased.

Zion used the analogy of “wearing masks” when he talked about switching his behavior back and forth between communities.
Any group that we go into, we put on a mask for that period of time. We adjust our behavior to that group. It’s not necessarily being fake or not being yourself, but we adjust the behavior to that group to be sure it’s an acceptable behavior. To put on the mask as in, don’t say what you are. That’s how you operate in any Black setting that’s predominantly straight. You can go in, you can sit down, you can fellowship with them, but you better not say it [that you are gay]. As long as it’s not said, although it may be known or unknown, it’s okay.

N’diol felt that he did not necessarily change to be accepted in “presumably heterosexual settings.” He struggled as he described this part of his life.

If I’ve switched, it’s been a subtle switch. I’m not just going to sit around and talk nasty and curse and all that kind of stuff in my professional setting, or when I’m around certain groups of people. I don’t feel like I have to be “straight” when I’m in a setting that is presumably heterosexual. I hate using these words because maybe everyone in there is gay, I don’t know. Sometimes I do feel like I have to represent a certain group. I don’t like that. I don’t like always having to represent my college, Black people, Black men, gay men, educated men, or this or that. I think that now, I’m still shifting. If we continue to be closeted in certain areas of our life, then what does that say about who you are? If I have to keep that to myself, does that say I’m not proud of it? Does that say I’m not okay with who I am?
Thompson initially expressed that he did not “change that much.” However, as he continued to reflect, he realized that he was successful at being able to “morph” into whatever a particular situation required.

I’ve been told that I’m a chameleon, and that I adapt to whatever situation I’m in. My thought process is that upon meeting someone, I may act in a certain manner to whatever fits the situation. I was a guy who wore a lot of different hats. I felt privileged because I could pull it off, whatever hat I could wear at that time. I felt like the character from *Six Degrees of Separation*. I felt like I knew how to change my dialect or change my vocabulary to make me fit in with a certain group of people. And not only could I change it and my style of dress and my hair, but I could make it work. People thought that whatever style I was giving them, that was me. If I was with White coworkers and we decide to have drinks, compared to me having drinks with the fraternity guys. It was two totally different sides. I knew that a lot of my friends couldn’t have pulled off things I was doing based on the fact that they had an extreme effeminate edge. I could pass; they (heterosexual students) had an interest in me. I was able to converse, discuss issues to the point that you thought I was living this in my everyday life. It’s amazing when I think back on it.

*Proving self.* Each research participant thought he had to prove himself to others as a Black gay man. The men identified proving themselves, or over-compensating for their multiple identities in order to achieve acceptance, respect, understanding, and recognition from their heterosexual counterparts.
Throughout his interview, Thompson talked about how he felt he “needed to prove” himself. He discussed choosing an HBCU because he “did not feel Black enough.” He felt that he needed to show others that he was just as good, if not better, as they were at any given task. This played out in the physical altercation he had with his younger brother, to his academic pursuits, and in his interpersonal relationships.

I chose to attend a historically Black college for a couple different reasons. I wanted to experience the Black community in more detail. I wanted to feel that I was more African American than what I really was. I thought that would help with that situation. I felt like I was the White boy. I felt by going to the HBCU, I would get rid of that, get rid of the stigma. I always felt like I had to prove myself…that you know, I’m really not that dumb, I can do this.

As highlighted earlier, Thompson discussed going through the pre-pledging process for a fraternity. He felt that he would have to work even harder to be accepted because he was gay.

My pledging this fraternity, I was still willing to go through the whole situation, more so, again, to prove myself, to show that I could do it. I always feel like I am proving myself. I always feel like I am in competition with myself on what and where I think I should be going; and what I think I should be doing. I just think being gay is icing on the cake. It just really adds to it. So, not only do I have to be doing this, but also because I am gay and Black, I have to be doing this. It really intensifies the situation.
Zion thought he had to prove himself as a student leader on campus. He denied his gay identity in many of the political decisions he made as the senior class president; in particular, his decision not to actively support the formation of a gay student organization at his HBCU.

I didn’t want to be considered the gay president at that time. I was already a gay student body president, but I didn’t want my whole agenda to end up being focused and not receive any other support because now I am the gay president who is trying to throw gay issues down in front of the student body. I had already done my one gay thing; I brought a gay author back to our campus (to speak to the student body). I didn’t want my whole agenda to be consumed by getting a gay organization when I had already did a controversial thing to the straight organizations that they were upset with me about. That’s one thing that I look back and I really regret that I didn’t get in and push it as much as I could.

Quentin involved himself in the world of using and selling drugs in order to prove himself. He wanted to show others that he was not just another “stereotypical sissy.” He crafted an image that became somewhat an alter ego.

I tried to become like really bad. Like, I’m going to go to college. I’m going to change myself over. I’m going to become bad. I didn’t want to be a fag anymore, a sissy anymore. I wanted to have a reputation that I made, like something that I could control. I wanted a bad reputation. For some reason, I thought drugs were the way to go. I could overcome this image of being soft if I was a hardcore drug addict. I could feel like they (heterosexual males) didn’t have anything over on
me because they were hard. I wasn’t in the circle, but there’s a certain kind of person, kind of hard, who sells drugs; or when you’re doing and selling hard drugs, it gives you this kind of credibility. It made me feel like I was tough. It really got me nowhere. Trying to do that got me doing a lot of drugs.

Summary of This Section

Internalizing homophobia was explored in this section. Several sub-themes involved how the participants: dismissed homophobia directed towards them, and avoided feminizing behaviors in order to be accepted as masculine Black men. Next, the participants described switching their behavior in order to fit into predominantly heterosexual Black settings. Lastly, proving himself to others emerged as sub-theme in the self-reflections of each participant of this study.

Significance of Attending an HBCU

The research participants found the experience of attending an HBCU to be incomparable. Each participant reflected on his support units while a student at his HBCU. Then, each participant talked about his life as a graduate of an HBCU.

Finding Support

The participants of this study encountered numerous challenges, including navigating campus and finding support as Black gay men within the HBCU culture. The men felt that openly homosexual students were silenced or not acknowledged as part of the general community. There were no recognized student organizations for homosexual students, or institutional allies who supported homosexual students.
As mentioned previously, Zion was a student leader at his HBCU, and he did not support a petition for a gay student group on his campus; although his support could have made a difference. Zion expressed regret in not supporting the petition. He did not want to be labeled, “the gay president” by the majority heterosexual population as a result of supporting the gay student organization. He described his decision as being “strictly political.”

As he twisted his dread locks, Thompson talked about the deficit of a gay student organization at his HBCU. He also offered a prediction about the future of gay student organizations at HBCUs.

We didn’t have a gay student group on campus. This kinda goes back to the whole stigma of the Black community and the church. You will not see the LGBT committee at an HBCU. I don’t think schools are ready for that, not the HBCU. It’s not that they (gay students) are not there, but who would join it (due to being easily identified as homosexual)? I can see people being confident enough to try to start one, but for it to be officially approved, I doubt it. I just don’t see anything like that happening. It’s sad to say.

The participants of this had very little support as Black gay men at their HBCUs. They found support through their friendship circles. They also identified their spiritual and religious connection as being a support unit while students at an HBCU.

*Friendship circles.* Every participant of this study identified their friends as the foremost unit of support while students at an HBCU. It was very interesting to watch how the face of each participant immediately lit up as he began to discuss the close-knit
friendships that he established while at an HBCU. The participants kept their friendship circles small. These friendship circles were quite meaningful, and very exclusive. I imagined a secret password being requisite for new members seeking entry into these circles. Zion provided a glimpse into the exclusivity and importance of his friendship circle.

I keep my circle small. You have to have someone to talk to as it relates to all your issues, your gay issues. So, my best friends were the ones I turned to for support. I had my gay group of friends, but we really didn’t socialize out in public. I would call them and we would have conversations as it relates to my sexuality.

Quentin would have continued to internalize homophobia and abuse if it were not for the support of his friends.

My friends were definitely my support. I had the whole rocks (being thrown at me) incident, and it was friends who pointed out to me how fucked up it was. My friends have been a lot of support. I had internalized so much self-hate. “If only I could be different, then Black males would stop abusing me.” Like, “It’s my fault that I’m being abused,” or “I’ve been abused all these years because I’m too feminine. If I could only change, they would stop, and I would have their friendship and respect.” Wanting to be different didn’t lead me anywhere, but closer to death. I would have internalized a lot more self-hate if I didn’t have the friends I have.
Black + heterosexual = homophobic? Zion and Quentin experienced verbal and physical harassment because of their sexual orientation. N’diol and Thompson witnessed harassment of other gay students by heterosexual Black men. However, none of the participants of this study expressed any aversion to friendships with heterosexual students.

N’diol described having friendships with heterosexual males. He felt that homophobia was a reality, but that not all Black people were homophobic. I feel like Black folks can be very judgmental when it comes to that (homosexuality). I don’t think in my life I’ve given people enough credit. Other than two people, every heterosexual person that I’ve told has been okay with it. So, I don’t think I’ve given Black people enough credit; or people in general, but particularly, Black people.

The participants of this study found support and acceptance as Black gay men at an HBCU through their friendship circles. As Thompson comically shared, “My friends have been a support system for me because give or take, that’s all we had down there. We were in the middle of nowhere!”

The participants’ friendships were a driving force pivotal to their success as students at an HBCU, along with their spiritual and religious connection.

Religious and spiritual connection. All of the participants identified spirituality and religiosity as being important in their lives. For some participants, spirituality was tied to religiosity. For others, religiosity and spirituality were separate entities.
In terms of religiosity, most of the participants grew up attending a Black church, and received negative messages about homosexuality within their respective religions. Having come out as Black gay men in college, they discussed reconciling and coming to terms with the negative messages they received from their religious doctrines.

N’diol’s grandfather was a preacher and his grandmother was a missionary. He recalled one of his family members telling him that he would never be “good enough” until he accepted “the Lord, Jesus Christ” as his “savior.” He recalled questioning God’s love because of his gay identity. N’diol prayed for his homosexuality to go away prior to coming out in college. As he became more comfortable with his sexual identity, he began to evaluate religion on his own terms. He stated, “I don’t believe who I am is wrong. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with who I am.”

Thompson also prayed for his homosexual attraction to go away during his childhood. He remembered praying to have “just one sexual experience with a man.” He then vowed to “get married and have some kids” after having a same-sex experience. Coming to terms with his orientation at the age of 19, Thompson described his journey as more of a spiritual one.

I’ve become a lot more spiritual, definitely. I was arrogant and cocky at the time. I was so paranoid. I was paranoid that they (my family) would know. Yet, I never shared anything with them. Since then, they’ve become a part of my life. I had a very traumatic experience that happened during undergrad. I’ve been given a second chance to re-evaluate some things. I’ve learned the importance of relationships and building bonds with people, which I don’t think I knew at that
time. People always think it’s the material things. Material things are not the most important things in life. And going off to school, that’s what my goal was. It wasn’t about the aspect of developing and getting an education, or experiences that I would gain from going off to school, and people I would meet. It took me going to an HBCU, graduating, and seeing how I had evolved that made me appreciate the whole process.

Zion is a member of a gay affirming church, and he was not always at peace on his spiritual and religious journeys. Zion identified as agnostic for a period of time. He stated, “I believed there was a God up there, but I didn’t know how he identified or related to me, or what religion was correct.” Throughout his college career, Zion researched different churches, but was “very in the middle of the road as it relates to religion and spirituality.”

Zion’s internal homophobia also played a part in his exploration of spirituality and religion as he encountered openly gay bishops and reverends of large congregations. I was at a different place in how I perceived religion and what you should say about religion and a reverend being gay. If you asked me four years ago, it wasn’t a possibility. I didn’t think you were damned and going to hell for being gay. I did think you were committing a sin for acting on your feelings. So, I thought it was sinful, particularly with the clergy.

As Zion began to research and examine the bible for himself, his religious and spiritual nature began to transform. Joining a gay affirmative church aided in his development as he began to learn and hear messages of love and self-love.
As you read the Bible, you should read scripture and the context that it’s in, and the time frame that it was written in. God does not create things, or a person to have love and for that love not to mean something and for it not to be real. So, when I looked at it and examined it from that perspective, I know that my relationship with God and Jesus Christ is real, and how I feel about religion is completely different than how I felt about it then (prior to coming out).

Quentin’s religious and spiritual journeys have been more complex. Once an atheist, he now calls himself an agnostic relativist.

I feel like I take a harder line on some things, and a softer line on others. There cannot be a God. I still think that Christianity is oppressive, and Judaism is far more oppressive, especially towards gay people. I don’t know if God exists.

Quentin realized that he has a connection to something that is spiritual as he was part of a 12-step program for his alcohol and drug addictions, “and that is a cornerstone in having a strong program when you’re in a 12 step program, having a relationship with a higher power.”

While it was challenging for Quentin to have faith in God, he acknowledged praying to God. He attributed this to the Christian tradition.

I was raised in a certain Christian tradition, but I don’t believe that there is a thing called ‘God’ manipulating something. I think that praying, and especially prayers of gratitude keep me grounded because there’s something about having anything that I know I haven’t done for myself. I couldn’t have imagined not drinking everyday. And now, I don’t drink. So, I have no idea. I think that’s miraculous. I
can’t believe that there’s a thing called ‘God’ that’s doing something for me; but I feel fortunate, and that’s why I pray.

Life After Graduation From an HBCU

The participants of this study share the accomplishment of graduation from an HBCU. Despite the trials and tribulations that they faced, there were many rewards that each participant discovered as a Black gay man attending an HBCU. The participants identified the HBCU as being integral in their development as members of various communities. They highlighted pursuing graduate studies, being part of a tradition, giving back to the community, career aspirations, and gaining community respect.

Pursuing graduate studies. After graduation, each research participant went on to pursue post-undergraduate studies, or set the goal to pursue post-undergraduate studies. All participants planned to pursue or complete such programs at predominantly White institutions (PWIs).

Quentin earned a master’s degree and doctorate at an Ivy League institution. He chose a PWI for graduate studies instead of an HBCU because:

I’m ambitious, and you have to go for the best school, and it was definitely about getting into the best school. The resources, the pedigree, I mean, the program that I was in was competitive as hell. People are functioning at a very high level. I’m so glad I went because it pushed me way, way up to function at a high level. It was ambition, and the perception of how people receive the degree from certain schools. It was like choosing, well, choosing an Ivy League versus a Black school.
Thompson also discussed his decision to attend a PWI for graduate studies instead of an HBCU.

I have gone on to complete my MBA. It was done at a very prestigious, top-tier institution. I know many times, many Black institutions, such as the one that I graduated from didn’t offer master’s programs. For that reason, I wanted to open my eyes to new avenues and new aspects of things. That’s why I chose to go to a different type of institution.

Zion is working on his graduate degree. Choosing a PWI had more to do with location than anything else. “I will travel for a Ph.D. program. I didn’t see myself traveling for a master’s program. I’m considering two HBCUs and two PWIs for my Ph.D.”

N’diol plans to attend a PWI for graduate study. He discussed his rationale for choosing to attend PWI for graduate study rather than an HBCU for his graduate degree.

As Black people in general in this country, we got a lot of progress to make. I can’t think of a single HBCU that offers the degree that I plan to pursue. I want to get my MFA (Master of Fine Arts), so I need to be around all different people. So, for me there are certain professors and certain editors who would be coming to these schools and there are no Black schools who offer that. Now, if I were to major in English or Africana Studies, African Diaspora Studies, or something like that, then definitely, I would consider an HBCU.
The participants believed that their undergraduate experiences at an HBCU prepared them for a variety of environments, including attending a PWI for graduate studies. They felt prepared to pursue advanced academic pursuits and life interests as HBCU graduates.

*Career attainment and aspirations.* The participants of this study entered into a variety of professional careers after graduating from an HBCU. Ranging in age from mid 20s to early 30s, the participants are young professionals, and they view their current professions as stepping-stones to their ultimate career goals.

Quentin is currently a research scientist. He completed his Ph.D. before age 30. He enjoys his work, but he is considering going back to pursue a degree in medicine.

I wanted to be a doctor. I thought I wanted to go to med school. Now, I still kinda do. But, I’ll be (in my 30s) before I can enjoy my life with my partner. I think I could get in today. I probably could not have gotten in right out of college because you know, I was “cracked out” (abusing drugs and alcohol). I was not ready. But, I’m sure I could get in med school today.

Thompson completed an MBA before age 30. After completing his MBA, he became an administrator in corporate America. He enjoys the responsibilities of his role as he aids in enforcing policies that will ultimately affect the organization and its clientele.

Zion is an educator. His mission is one of service to the community in which he serves. He reflected on working in an ultra-conservative setting for one year. Although his values differed from those of the institution, he honored his contract, and continued to
give it his all. Currently pursuing a master’s degree in an educational field, he hopes to become an educational administrator.

N’diol described himself as “one of the confused ones” in relation to his career aspirations. This was not too disturbing because he has accomplished a great deal despite his “confusion.” He particularly enjoys the work that he does with adolescents.

I’m able to expose them to information that they probably are not getting in school. They really respect me for that. One student was like, “I wish you were here a few years ago when I was really messing up in school.” I have conversations with students about what’s going on in their community, why it’s important for them to be conscience of what’s happening.

N’diol plans to get his MFA, and become a successful writer. He also wants to relocate to Africa as he recognizes many great “opportunities for African Americans, or Africans of the Diaspora” there. He wants to bridge the gap between Africans and African Americans.

I would like to teach there. I would like to teach a writing course there. One goal of mine is to eventually teach Black men in fiction. I don’t know if anyone is doing that, but I would like to. Also, strengthening the relationship between Africans and Africans in the Diaspora, I think that’s really important. Somebody told us that Africans don’t like African Americans and we believed it, and we hate the African that is in us. And so, I guess there’s some kind of conflict between Africans and African-Americans in America based on that misinformation. I think that if we don’t acknowledge who we are, where we came from, and the strength
that we have as a people, then we’re going to remain in this very pathetic state that we’re in right now. So, I think that bridging that gay is really important. I want to be a part of it.

*Being part of a tradition.* Graduating from an HBCU was a significant event for N’diol. He described HBCUs as not “acknowledging that gay people exist in the Black community.” As such, graduation was very “emotional” because he was able to navigate a community in which he was “just kinda there and gay.” He described navigating his HBCU.

For me, going to an HBCU opened my eyes up to the spectrum of Black people. Knowing that there were, that there are a lot of Black people who share my interests, and who have interests that are different from mine; Black people who spoke more than two different languages, or who were interested in going to med school, law school, becoming engineers, I was able to learn from them. It just opened my eyes to all the different shades of Black folks, and Black folks who dress however they want to dress, and who are just who they are; because before I just felt like a weirdo because I didn’t fit into that little box. It just opened me up.

Zion held various offices in student organizations, including senior class president, and he his service to students was linked to the mission of the HBCU from which he graduated.

[Even though I am a gay male] They supported and believed in the things that I did regardless of the outside comments that occurred. I loved what I was able to do at an HBCU that helped students, not necessarily gay students or straight
students; my issue was helping the students and the university. The ability to still help others. That is the message I got from an HBCU, that we serve the community in which we exist.

Thompson described his experiences at an HBCU as some of his “happiest times.” He enjoyed the tradition of “camaraderie among students at an HBCU.” Thompson witnessed the harassment of other gay students or perceived to be gay students. He minimized the harassment in reflection, “like I said, everyone at an HBCU is going to have issues with someone at one point or another.” From that lens, Thompson felt like he “was part of the student body.”

Listening and reading about W.E.B. DuBois, and the talented tenth, that only 10% of the Black community will be at the forefront, or the elite of the Black community. And so, I appreciate the fact that I am a graduate. Knowing that I am a graduate of an institution that is historically known for producing educated African Americans. I don’t think I would be in this position without their assistance. I know I wouldn’t be the person I am today with out it. I am thankful.

Quentin believed that facing the major challenges of harassment at his HBCU was essential to his development as Black gay male. Similar to N’diol, he also believed that the HBCU offered an environment in which it was okay to be different from the stereotypes of Black people.

It’s helped me to see that there is more to life than fitting in. I don’t have to be one in the crowd. I’ve had so many sanctions that it’s like, I almost don’t worry about fitting in. It’s allowed me to be more different, to be bolder than a lot of
people would be. I’m finally being able to be rebellious in a way that my action actually does people in the world some good, hopefully. I can be revolutionary like Dr. King’s civil disobedience. I think being a beat up gay Black male, it makes it harder and easier in some ways to be radical, to have radical politics. I’m trying to go beyond reading radical politics, and actually being radical politics. Because everything has been so hard, I’ve had to search for answers just to be okay with who I am. That’s been great. Being Black and gay…I think that it’s attending an HBCU] given me some knowledge about the world.

The men of this study felt a strong connection to the HBCUs from which they graduated. In spite of homophobia and heterosexism, the HBCU was elemental to their personal growth and development. The participants reflected and highlighted numerous rewards of attending and being a part of the HBCU tradition. Embedded within these rewards and traditions was the action of giving back to the community.

Giving back to the community. Attending an HBCU inspired the men of this study to become more service oriented. Each participant was involved in various service organizations during their college years, including NAACP and student government. The missions of such organizations complemented the mission of the HBCU, which was an important source in the participants’ desire to give back to their respective communities after graduating.

Both Thompson and Zion used their experiences at an HBCU to encourage others to attend. Thompson believed in the “nurturing” environment of the HBCU so much that
he not only encouraged others to attend, but he also encouraged one of his brothers to attend.

I believe they do nurture people of color and ensure that even through trials and tribulations, whatever you may encounter in school, you will graduate. I believe in that so much that I forced my younger brother, literally forced to the point that I put some clothes in the car, told him to jump in the car, and I literally left him at my HBCU. I forced him to go to an HBCU.

Zion was emphatic that encouraging others to attend an HBCU, particularly his HBCU, was a way of giving back to his community. He was very much invested in reaching back into his community to bring another forward.

I will veer a student to an HBCU. In veering them there, I’m going to push them to my HBCU. I do support all HBCUs, and the ones I have knowledge about. I tell my friends, “I can get you in there.”

Volunteerism also played a considerable role in the participants’ conception of giving back to the community. Zion named the HBCU as being instrumental in his philanthropic nature. He not only gave back to the Black community, but he also gave back to the Black gay community.

That is the message I got from my HBCU. We serve the community in which we live, and we impact and do some positive work in that community. My involvement with Black gay pride is significant to me. Actually, I received a volunteer award for my first year of volunteering for Black gay pride. So, that’s kinda different for me because I didn’t expect it.
Summary of This Section

The significance of attending an HBCU was explored in this section. The participants discussed finding support through their friendship circles and spiritual connection while a student at an HBCU. The participants experienced several negative events, including verbal and physical harassment while students at an HBCU. On the same token, they also found the HBCU responsible for enriching their personalities, contributing to their growth, and instilling many positive values. Life after attending an HBCU included pursuing graduate study, achieving success professionally, being a part of the HBCU tradition, and giving back to the community.

Summing up the HBCU Experience

Each participant was asked to describe the significance of attending an HBCU in three words. This task was a challenge for all of the participants, and they each requested more time to reflect. They wanted to be just and to honor the institutions from which they graduated. Some of the words and descriptions chosen by the men were synonymous with each other, and where appropriate, were combined.

Feeling “Proud”

Zion took pride in accomplishing so much as a Black gay man at an HBCU. He felt successful because he was able to “mix and mingle” with various communities while attending an HBCU.

I’m proud of what I represent with all that (as a graduate of an HBCU); my family, being Black, being gay, and being part of something greater (the HBCU community in general). I know the things I did help to change and shape
individuals’ lives at the institution. The things I do now, the way that I talk to people, the way that I address people, that I am able to mix and mingle in different circles, affluent and poor; and being able to address all of those communities makes me proud.

Feeling “Triumphant”

Thompson completed an associate’s degree from a community college prior to attending an HBCU. The HBCU experience not only aided in his growth as a Black man, but he also matured as a gay man. He described feeling “triumphant.”

I was previously accustomed to socializing and interacting with White culture and society. Attending an HBCU forced me to network in a setting that was out of my comfort zone. Many thought I would not be successful at an HBCU due to the fact that I was gay, due to African Americans not accepting the gay lifestyle. My achievement at an HBCU was unheard of due to gay Black males at the institution usually being either closeted or taking a back seat to other students at the school. I went against the grain.

It Was “My Tribe”

Quentin felt proud to “find” himself as a Black gay man at an HBCU. Despite the trials and tribulations, which he endured, he credited the HBCU experience with being an essential piece of his coming out as a gay man.

During college I was searching for identity and searching for acceptance, but I did not know it at the time. I was not self-conscious. I was very much caught up in the culture. There is something inexplicable about Black/Blackness as cultural
and existential categories. I wanted something bigger than my tribe and myself. A large part of my experience in college was coming out and becoming comfortable with my sexual orientation.

*It Was “Powerful”*

Both Zion and N’diol found “power” in attending an HBCU. N’diol described his experience as “empowering.” Zion accomplished so much academically and socially at his HBCU, that he coined his tenure as “powerful.”

The whole experience of being a graduate of an HBCU is very powerful. Being a graduate of any institution, coming from the community in which I came from…of the larger family that I come from, I’m probably one of the first generations to go to college and receive an undergraduate degree. So, that’s very powerful.

*It Was “Unconventional”*

Thompson decided to attend an HBCU against the wishes of his mother and his father, both of whom wanted for Thompson to attend a PWI. For that reason, he described his experience as “unconventional.”

It was unthinkable for me to attend an HBCU. In fact, my parents both suggested that I should rethink my college decision before attending an HBCU. The HBCU helped me to bring to surface some of my best qualities.

N’diol did not use the term, “unconventional” to define his experience, but his experiences at an HBCU seemed to defy convention as he could not imagine going to any other institution. He described his experience as being one of a kind.
There is absolutely no other experience like the HBCU experience, period. You can’t recreate it inside of an African American student association or the NAACP chapter of a school. It’s a total experience.

*It Was “Nurturing”*

N’diol described his HBCU experience as being “nurturing” because he felt that he was surrounded by a wealth of information and support while a student. His energy was radiant as he described this experience.

In this environment, one can have a blast while gaining all of the tools necessary to be successful in the global community. You’re met by peers, mentors, mentees, experts, surrogate mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles; people who genuinely care about you, want you to succeed, and know what you’ll face.

Thompson’s upbringing informed a great deal of how he interpreted the world, especially making the decision to attend an HBCU. Thompson did not describe his experience as “nurturing,” but he credited his HBCU with his ability to thrive socially. He also felt that his institution was helpful in his professional pursuits.

Due to my upbringing, and both of my parents previously attending a predominantly White university, I believe this environment laid the foundation for my relationship and communication skills, personally and professionally. Due to my diligence and hard work, I was able to make strides at an HBCU that allowed me access to success that I do not think would be attainable through a predominantly White university.
Quentin described feeling a bond that was unique to attending his HBCU. He suffered various tribulations while a student at his HBCU. While he did not utilize the term, “nurturing” to describe his experiences, his deep bonds and connections saw him through and kept him going.

I formed very deep bonds with a small group of friends who created an environment of acceptance and support. It is something about our all being Black that made those bonds possible but clearly being Black is not sufficient in itself for community.

Summary

This chapter discussed the college experiences of the research participants as students at an HBCU. The participants also reflected on their membership in both the Black community and mainstream White society as Black gay men. A number of themes emerged, including coming out as gay men in college and witnessing sexual harassment and homophobia during the college years.

Each participant felt pressure to adhere to hype-masculine behavior in the Black community. They also highlighted the complexities of having multiple identities and negative media projections of people who are Black and gay. In mainstream society, the men felt homosexuality was generally more accepted than in the Black community, but highlighted experiencing both blatant and covert forms of racism as Black men.

Internalizing homophobia was then discussed, which included how the participants: dismissed homophobia and avoided feminizing behaviors in order to be accepted as masculine Black men. Switching his behavior and proving himself in order to
fit into predominantly heterosexual settings also emerged as sub-themes in the reflections of each participant.

The significance of attending an HBCU included the participants’ finding support through their friendship circles and spiritual connection while students at an HBCU. After graduating from an HBCU, the men of this study realized a number of achievements, including: pursuing graduate study, achieving success professionally, being a part of the HBCU tradition, and giving back to the community.

The research participants described their experiences as students at an HBCU in three words. No participant used the same word, however there were similar descriptions and explanations. Where appropriate, similar descriptions and explanations were grouped under one central word. According to the participants, the meaning of attending an HBCU included: feeling “proud;” “triumphant;” and part of a “tribe.” The research participants also described the HBCU experience as: “powerful;” “unconventional;” and “nurturing.”

In the next chapter, I describe the essence of attending an HBCU as a Black gay male. I also discuss my experiences as the researcher in this study. Like the research participants, I too provide three words to describe the essence of my experience.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter contains a summary of the purpose, methodology, research participants and research questions of the study. After that, the thematic analysis is used to provide answers to the research questions. In the next section of this chapter, I reflect on my experiences as the participant-observer, and then move to explore the implications of the findings in this study for future research and for professional practice.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black gay men with an undergraduate degree from a historically Black college or university (HBCU). The goal was to explore the self-reflections and experiences of these men; in order to assess how attending an HBCU might have impacted their sexual orientation, racial/ethnic, and general identity development.

Methodology

I utilized phenomenological methodology to identify and highlight the lived experiences of each participant. Phenomenology was most appropriate for this study because it enables a researcher to describe the meaning, interpretation, and essence of one’s experiences (Creswell, 1998; Grbich, 2007; Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1990).

Information was collected from participants through in-person interviews and autobiographical sketches. A total of four men participated in this study, and provided self-reflective information about their experiences at an HBCU.
Participants

I utilized a “snowball” technique in the selection of each participant for this study. While it was not my intention, the participants represented a generally homogeneous age group with shared ambitions for graduate education. Information about each participant was gathered primarily through individual interviews and an autobiographical sketch that each participant completed. None of the participants attended the same HBCU. In addition, the experiences represented attendance at four distinct HBCUs. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and the identities of their HBCUs were disguised.

Research Questions

The study involved four research questions. First, what are the lived experiences of Black gay men who have graduated from an HBCU? Next, how does an HBCU impact the general, racial/ethnic, and sexual orientation identities of male graduates who are Black and gay? Third, are the experiences of Black gay men at an HBCU markedly different from their experiences in mainstream White society? Finally, how do Black gay men make meaning of their time while attending an HBCU?

Thematic Analysis of the Data

Each of these questions was kept in mind during the interviews with the participants. Then the data were analyzed for themes in the responses of the participants. A number of themes emerged that appeared to be central to the experiences of the men of this study. Each main theme had a series of sub-themes, and these are listed in the tables on the following page.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Deciding to Attend an HBCU</td>
<td>The college experience: Attending on scholarship;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Living on campus; Being part of the Black experience by going to an HBCU</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coming Out at an HBCU</td>
<td>Coming out to self; Coming out to others at the college; Coming out to</td>
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<td>women; Coming out to men; Coming out to mother; Assuming people already</td>
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<td>Witnessing Harassment and Homophobia</td>
<td>“I could pass;” “I’ve had stuff thrown at me when I was at an HBCU;”</td>
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<td>Witnessing homophobia of fraternity members; Witnessing homophobia of</td>
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<td>Witnessing homophobia in a family member</td>
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<td>Being a Black gay male in the Black Community</td>
<td>“Black masculinity;” “Being called “faggot;” “Acting White” instead of</td>
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<td>“acting Black;” Valorizing violence; Having multiple identities; Media</td>
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<td>projections of Black and gay; A spoken unspoken; Not all Black people are</td>
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<td>Theme</td>
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<td>Being Black and gay in</td>
<td>Racism in the mainstream; Acceptance in the mainstream; No interest in the mainstream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Society</td>
<td>Internalizing homophobia: “You can’t beat somebody into respecting you;” The effeminate is the other; Switching behavior to fit in; Proving self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping Strategies</td>
<td>Finding support: Friendship circles; Religious and spiritual connection; Life after graduation from an HBCU: Pursuing graduate studies; Career attainment and aspirations; Being part of a tradition; Giving back to the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of Attending an HBCU</td>
<td>Summing up the HBCU</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feeling “proud;” Feeling “triumphant;” It was my “tribe;” It was “powerful;” It was “unconventional;” It was “nurturing”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relating the Themes to the Research Questions

What are the lived experiences of Black gay men who have graduated from an HBCU?

Coming out. The most defining experience of the research participants in this study was coming out as gay men while students at an HBCU. Coming out was layered with a number of stages and considerations for the each participant. These layers included: coming out to himself, coming out to others in college, and coming out to his mother.

All of the participants assumed that people already knew they were gay, and this seemed to affect their participation in the process of coming out to others. One of the participants stated, “I always think people already know.” Another participant expressed, “I was always under the assumption that people knew I was gay.” The assumption that people already knew about their gay identity seemed to be a defense mechanism for the participants that protected them from disclosing their orientation until they felt safe and comfortable with the particular situation.

The participants were in their freshman, sophomore, and junior years in college, and ranged in age from 18 to 20 years when they first disclosed their gay orientation to others at an HBCU. The participants primarily came out to others when they felt comfortable and ready. All of the research participants identified as “gay,” and did not subscribe to alternative labels to substitute their sexual identity, such as same gender loving (SGL). One of the participants voiced this best when he said, “I don’t think I was openly gay. I’m honestly gay. If you asked me, I’m going to tell you.”
Witnessing harassment, heterosexism, and homophobia. Degrees of outness, femininity, and masculinity seemed to play a role in the victimization each participant. This finding is consistent with those of D’Augelli (1992). N’diol and Thompson identified as being “masculine” gay men. Zion classified himself as being “in the middle,” and Quentin identified as possessing more effeminate attributes.

The participants witnessed heterosexism and homophobia from: fraternity members, college officials, college friends, and family. Both Zion and Thompson experienced the effects of homophobia in the fraternity. Quentin and Zion experienced the effects of homophobia in college officials. N’diol encountered heterosexism by a college friend, and Thompson encountered heterosexism by his younger brother. Quentin suffered verbal and physical harassment based on his gay identity while at his HBCU, and Zion was a victim of verbal harassment at his HBCU.

Finding support. The participants believed that their HBCUs were not accepting of homosexuality, and one piece of evidence was the absence of official organizations for gay students at their institutions. According to Rhoads (1997), gay students are more likely to feel comfortable being out on campus when a supportive network of friends surround them. The research participants felt that their friendships with other students on campus, particularly gay students were a huge support when they were undergraduates at an HBCU. Quentin said that he would have “internalized so much self-hate” if not for the support of his friends in college. Thompson stated, “My friends have been a support system for me because give or take, that’s all we had down there.”
“Being part of the Black experience.” Each participant felt fortunate to be a student and graduate of an HBCU, therefore becoming part of a rich tradition. In spite of the various forms of oppression that they witnessed as gay men, they took pride in their status as part of the HBCU network at large. The participants also expressed comfort in being around other Black students. One of the participants said that he “wanted to be around educated Black people,” and he fulfilled this desire by attending his HBCU.

**How does an HBCU impact the general, racial/ethnic, and sexual orientation identities of male graduates who are Black and gay?**

**Ways that the HBCU affected their general identity development.** The research participants seemed to develop into well-rounded individuals while students at an HBCU. As men with multiple identities, the participants found strategies to navigate their HBCUs with multiple lenses. Quentin described his HBCU as key in his development as a Black male and a gay male. He illustrated attending an HBCU as being part of a “tribe.” He felt there was something about “being Black” that encouraged the “bonds” that he made in that community. He also felt that his experiences of coming out and “becoming comfortable” with his sexual orientation would not have been possible without his HBCU.

**Giving back to the community.** The HBCU seemed to be influential in the research participants’ desire to serve and give back to the community as they often mentioned their HBCUs as having a mission of service to the community. The men gave of their time in various communities, which included the Black community and gay communities of color. The participants also served as volunteers for local agencies and organizations.
Despite the “trials and tribulations” that they encountered as gay men, many of the participants encouraged others to attend their HBCU, including family and friends. Perhaps Zion stated it best when he said, “That is the message I got from my HBCU. We serve the community in which we live, and we impact and do some positive work in that community.”

_Career attainment and aspirations._ After graduating from an HBCU, each participant felt encouraged to pursue further education and gainful employment. All the participants felt that the HBCU environment prepared them with a variety of skills to be successful in a variety of settings and situations. The participants employed these skills in their quest for graduate education at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) as well as in their respective career fields. Both Zion and N’diol are educators. Currently, Zion is completing a master’s degree at a predominantly White institution. N’diol has plans to pursue graduate studies in Africa. Thompson completed his M.B.A. at a prestigious PWI, and is an administrator in corporate America. Quentin completed his Ph.D. at an Ivy League institution. Currently, he is a research scientist.

*Ways That the HBCU Affected Their Racial/Ethnic Identity*

_Being around other Black people._ Most of the participants discussed their experiences with racism and stereotyping in mainstream White communities, as well as their own internalization of racism. The racial/ethnic identity development of the research participants was mostly consistent with major stage models of racial/ethnic identity development (Cross, 1971, 1991, 1995; Jackson, 1976, 2001; Phinney, 1990).
All of the participants grew up in predominantly Black communities, but most of them attended predominantly White schools prior to going to college. Going to an HBCU was a rite of passage in many ways for the participants of this study. Choosing to attend an HBCU was an opportunity to hear other “Black voices,” or to be a part of the “Black experience.” The participants felt that attending an HBCU helped them to achieve both a positive self-identity and self-concept as Black men.

*Developing a Black identity.* N’diol’s ethnic identity development seemed to be consistent with the three distinct stages of Phinney’s Model of Ethnic Identity Development (1990). N’diol entered his HBCU with both a positive and negative unexamined ethnic identity. He “was just always really proud” of his heritage, and was thankful that his mother taught him Black history. On the other hand, prior to attending an HBCU, N’diol thought that Black people who attended college were from predominantly middle-upper class backgrounds.

Attending an HBCU fostered N’diol’s ethnic identity search. He explored and felt that his HBCU “opened” him “up to the spectrum of Black people.” Not only did he meet individuals from affluent upbringings, but he also met people who came from less affluent communities. He was also introduced to Black people “who spoke more than two different languages, who were interested in going to med school;” who wore their hair in “cornrows,” listened to “mainstream hip hop, and were very intelligent.”

These experiences helped N’diol to reach an achieved ethnic identity in which he established a confident sense of his own ethnicity, and became interested in learning more about other cultures, as his undergraduate major was international studies.
Quentin entered his HBCU with an achieved ethnic identity, as he felt proud of his ethnic heritage, and felt a positive ethnic identification as a Black man. (Phinney, 1990). Quentin grew up in a predominantly Black community. Black culture and Black history was taught and affirmed not only in his community, but also in the schools he attended prior to going to an HBCU. He viewed attending an HBCU as a natural progression of the community in which he grew up.

Thompson felt like “the White boy” because he was often teased by other Black children for “acting White,” or for “talking White.” Although he felt a sense of connection to both his community and family, Thompson chose to attend an HBCU to combat the “acting White” label. He wanted to immerse and reaffirm himself in Black culture (Cross, 1995, Jackson, 1976, 2001). Thompson was introduced to a wide variety of Black students at his HBCU, and he found support “hanging around” other high-achieving, “like-minded individuals.”

Thompson felt that the HBCU exposed him to both the “Black experience” and a deeper connection with Black culture. Internalization of his Black identity fostered an appreciation for different cultures (Cross, 1971, 1991, 1995; Jackson, 1976, 2000, Phinney, 1990). Internalizing their Black identity was achieved by each participant as he credited his respective HBCU with: providing skills to become successful in non-Black environments, including PWIs; imparting community service and philanthropic values; and instilling pride in being both an HBCU graduate as well as a member of the general Black community.
Ways That the HBCU Affected Their Sexual Orientation Identity Development

Although the research participants felt the HBCU environment was not accepting of homosexual students, it was in this environment that each participant first came out as a gay man.

The coming out process. Coming out was an ongoing process for all of the participants. This process was consistent with the major models of sexual orientation identity development highlighted in this study (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994; Fassinger, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1998; Troiden, 1988).

Coming out was particularly liberating for the research participants because it meant that they “didn’t have to be straight anymore,” and live as closeted gay men. Coming out was “very important.” Zion described coming out as a process that did not conclude after merely disclosing his gay identity.

Each coming out is important because it challenges the person that you come out to, to make a decision at that point; how they are going to react, how they are going to respond, not only at that moment, but later on when it counts.

While the participant’s style of coming out to others differed, his process of coming out involved the following stages: 1. Identity confusion and awareness of same sex attraction, which he identified at a young age, usually in his childhood or pre-teen years. Each participant explained how he did not deny his same sex feelings, but he did not immediately share these feelings with others because he did not understand why he felt attracted to the same sex. 2. The participants did not understand what “gay” or “homosexuality” was until they were well into their teenage years. It was during these
years that each participant *explored* the definition of homosexuality, and eventually came out to himself as a gay man. 3. Half of the participants *experienced intimacy* with a female prior to experiencing intimacy with a male. The remaining half only experienced intimacy with a male. 4. All of the participants were college-aged (between 18 and 20) when they *disclosed their homosexual identity* to others, and began to *create a positive self-concept*.

*Coming out to women and men.* Gender differences played a part in the coming out of each participant. One of the participants felt more comfortable coming out to women. He described being raised primarily by women, and having “tons of lesbian and straight women” friends in college. Therefore, he felt comforted while in the presence of women. The “presence of straight men” however made him feel “uncomfortable,” he admitted that establishing friendships with men was “a problem” for him. There was a feeling of “shame” in his interactions with heterosexual Black men because he felt that he did not embody what Black men were “supposed to be” because he was gay.

The remaining participants felt more comfortable coming out to other men, and maintained friendships with mostly men instead of women. One participant felt ashamed and challenged when disclosing his orientation to women. He felt as though he would “be hurting” Black women because his gay identity would present “an issue of them not having access to good Black men.

*Coming out to mother.* The disclosure of each participant’s sexual orientation to others was significant. Each participant found value in coming out, and each participant
felt that his life as a gay man was richer when he disclosed his gay identity to his mother, the most powerful figure in each participant’s coming out reflection.

Each participant believed that coming out to his mother facilitated his coming out to others. Once his mother knew about his gay identity, each participant was not as concerned about the potentially negative reactions of others to whom he disclosed.

Consideration of gender was not a factor for the research participants when they came out as gay men to their mothers. Their mothers represented neither a masculine nor feminine archetype. This is particularly interesting as most of the research participants expressed feeling more comfortable coming out to Black men.

Each participant’s mother represented a source of authority, tradition, honor, and home. This was evident through each participant’s reflections. For example, Zion stated, “I think that’s what hurts a lot of folks, the fact that they have not told their mother. Once you tell your mother, who gives a damn?” N’diol reflected, “I would be going through stuff, and wanted to talk to my mom about it…it was just weird, her not knowing.” Thompson recounted how his mother told him that she “already knew.” After coming out, he felt that he “could tell her everything.” Quentin classified coming out to his mother as his “second biggest coming out,” after coming out to his female friends in college.

Each participant’s mother was the most powerful figure in his coming out reflections. Coming out to one’s mother is not considered in any of the models of sexual orientation identity development. This suggests a possible cultural difference in the coming out process for Black gay men.
Witnessing Sexual Harassment as Black Gay Men

The current literature about the prevalence of sexual harassment of college students indicates that it happens everywhere on campus (Bourassa & Shipton, 1991; Hill & Silva, 2005, Hughes, 1991; Rhoads, 1994). Because of their gay identity, the participants of this study both witnessed and experienced physical and verbal harassment.

All of the research participants witnessed harassment of other gay students, or students perceived to be gay; and two of them were victims of both verbal and physical harassment, which included “hurtful” name-calling, and incidents in which rocks and glass bottles were thrown at one of the participants. Each participant seemed to employ defense mechanisms, which helped him to cope with the harassment.

Coping With Sexual Harassment as Black Gay Men

The research participants seemed to balance well with the struggles of heterosexism. According to Perry’s Scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development (1970), college students employ defensive mechanisms when faced with troubling circumstances, including: temporizing—acting in a manner that yields to the dominant opinion or caters to the occasion; retreating—encountering a difficult or challenging situation, and choosing to maintain a simplified viewpoint, rather than rebel against the situation; and escaping—resisting the need to grow, or losing self in a particular situation that presents harm in some form. Perry’s (1970) model examines defensive mechanisms as opportunities to prevent regression, and encourage progression.

Internalizing homophobia. The participants of this study internalized homophobia and heterosexism by employing defense mechanisms that threatened or challenged them
as gay men. The research participants’ internalized homophobia by: minimizing harassment, accepting abuse as a part of life, and taking a position of silence in response to homophobia. Avoiding other gay men, particularly “effeminate” acting gay men and switching behavior to fit into predominantly heterosexual settings were employed by the participants of this study. The participants also internalized homophobia by proving themselves to heterosexuals in order to receive acceptance.

*Are the experiences of Black gay men at an HBCU markedly different from their experiences in mainstream White society?*

*Their experiences in the Black community.* The men in this study negotiated their way in both the Black community and mainstream White society. In the Black community, the participants seemed to contend with issues of hyper-masculinity, homophobia, and heterosexism. The participants witnessed violence toward gay people in the Black community, and felt that they were tolerated in the Black community when they were silent about their gay identity.

*“Black Masculinity.”* The element of race distinguishes Black masculinity from masculinity (Wise, 2001). Ethnic, or “Black” conceptions of masculinity contributed to the marginalization of the participants of this study. Kite and Whitley (1995) pinpoint gender socialization as a key ingredient in the negative attitudes of heterosexual men toward homosexual men. During the gender socialization process, men learn to condemn behaviors and characteristics considered feminine. If one expresses masculinity, he is not hated as much as his effeminate counterpart (Brown, 2005).
The participant’s apparent masculinity affected the level of harassment that he faced from childhood to adulthood. The research participants were victimized and marginalized when they participated in activities or behaved in ways that were not stereotypically masculine. They did not experience as much condemnation when they exhibited behavior considered masculine, which reinforces Wilkinson’s (2004) assertion that heterosexual men dislike their gay counterparts because they “represent a violation of the way men are supposed to be (e.g., nonfeminine)” (p. 122).

Boykin (1996) wrote that Black men hyper-masculinize their gender image, and each participant discussed the pressures and expectations attached to being masculine and Black. All of the research participants felt that they did not fit into the stereotypical mold of Black masculinity. According to the participants, Black masculinity involved, but was not limited to: playing sports, such as football; being “tough,” or “overly macho;” sexually degrading; and endorsing homophobia through verbal or physical abuse.

_Not all Black people are homophobic._ The participants did not feel that all Black people were homophobic despite identifying the general Black community as not accepting homosexuality. Although the participants witnessed homophobia and abuse of homosexuals in the Black community, they also encountered and established friendships with individuals in the general Black community who were accepting of them as Black gay men. Thus, acknowledging that not all Black people were intolerant of gay people was important.
Their Experiences in Mainstream White Society

Although the participants also experienced heterosexism in mainstream White communities, they described mainstream White society as being generally more accepting of homosexuality than the Black community. As gay men, the participants generally felt accepted. As Black men, the participants were victims of racism in White communities, both homosexual and heterosexual.

Dealing with racism in the mainstream. The participants dealt with racism as well as heterosexism in mainstream society. Racism was evident in both general mainstream society and the mainstream gay community. One of the participants described a “humiliating” encounter in which he was racially profiled and detained by a sheriff. Others described similar incidents in which they or others they knew were victims of both blatant and covert racism. Thus, each man in this study was a victim of oppression in various communities. The men had to “learn to cope with two distinct forms of oppression: heterosexism and racism (Wilson & Miller, 2002, p. 372).” That is, the participants felt pressure to remain silent and invisible in the Black community as gay men, and as Black men in White culture.

Coping Strategies in Mainstream White Communities

A few of the research participants coped with racism by not affiliating in White communities, a finding that is consistent with the research of a few scholars (Icard, 1986; Wilson & Miller, 2002). One of the participants felt pressure to “look” and “be a certain way” in mainstream society. It was a form of pressure with which he felt uncomfortable,
and therefore did not “really move in White society.” Another participant did not feel an attraction to mainstream culture, which included “the music, the culture and the people.”

Coping Strategies in Black and Mainstream White communities

As described earlier, the research participants internalized homophobia. They also employed a number of other coping strategies when faced with adverse situations in both Black and White communities. The participants seemed to balance well the struggles of racism as well as the struggles of heterosexism. Their coping strategies included switching behavior to fit into presumably heterosexual settings and turning to friends for support. One of the participants stood up for himself, which resulted in more violence against him. All of the participants highlighted keeping faith when they encountered incidents of racism and homophobia.

These strategies are consistent with those identified by Wilson & Miller (2002), who found that Black gay men employed five strategies when dealing with non-gay friendly situations: *role flexing*—in this study, the men either conformed to a heterosexual group norm, or they remained silent when heterosexuals made anti-gay comments; *keeping the faith*—a few of the participants highlighted having faith in some form of a higher power in order to cope; *standing your ground*—one of the participants said that he received more harassment and physical violence towards him, when he stood his ground against harassment; *changing sexual behavior*—most of the participants avoided contact with effeminate gay men in order to avoid perceived negative consequences; and *accepting self*—in some circumstances, the participants decided to accept their sexual identity and were unwilling to change in order to fit in.
How do Black gay men make meaning of their time while attending an HBCU?

Establishing friendship circles. All of the participants identified their respective circle of friends as being their most important support unit while undergraduates at their HBCU. The participants relied on friendship circles with other gay men to deal with the issues they faced at their HBCUs as well as in society in general. Wilson and Miller (2002), refer to these friendship circles as an “alternative family. (p. 383).” Each participant identified his friendship circle as providing him with emotional support. A few of the participants identified receiving more emotional support from their friends than from their biological family.

The participants’ friendship circles were extremely exclusive. The majority of participants were hesitant to begin friendships with other gay students on campus, particularly “effeminate acting” gay men because they wanted to avoid being harassed and labeled as “effeminate acting” by others. These participants also internalized homophobia, which also affected their ability to establish friendships with more flamboyant gay men.

Maintaining friendships with other gay students on campus required a great deal of compromise for some of the research participants. One of the participants felt pressure from his fraternity and a campus official to distance himself from his openly gay friends. As a result, the participant chose not to socialize with his friends in public, but still felt deeply bonded and connected to his friends.

Establishing religious and spiritual connection. Most of the participants grew up attending the Black church, and reflected how their religious doctrines disapproved of
homosexuality. The participants initially felt inconsistent as gay men because their religion disagreed with homosexuality.

N’diol and Thompson prayed for their homosexuality to go away during childhood. As these men became more aware of both their gay identity and relationship with God, they felt a restored faith in their skin as Black gay men. N’diol stated, “I don’t believe who I am is wrong.”

Both Zion and Quentin identified as either atheist or agnostic. Quentin did not believe that there was a God controlling events in his life, although he prayed regularly. Zion struggled with being a gay man and believing in God throughout his time at an HBCU until he discovered a “gay-affirming church.” Being a member of this church transformed his impression of God into an entity who “loves” everyone. This outlook aided in his accepting himself as a gay man.

*Being part of a tradition.* The trials that each participant faced as a Black gay man at an HBCU were met with accomplishments. Zion held a number of offices in student organizations. He was also a senior class officer. He felt extremely proud of the leadership opportunities afforded to him while a student at his HBCU in the face of harassment and homophobia aimed at him. Both Thompson and N’diol reflected on being graduates of an HBCU. Thompson described being an HBCU graduate as “an amazing task,” while N’diol described his graduation day as “very emotional.” Quentin not only overcame verbal and physical harassment, but he also overcame addiction to drugs and alcohol while a student at his HBCU. Having the support of those close to them greatly aided the participants of this study.
Thompson felt that some of his “happiest times” were spent at his HBCU. He felt “thankful” to be a part “of an institution that is historically known for producing educated African Americans.” N’diol expressed that attending his HBCU exposed him “to the spectrum of Black people.” Zion felt fortunate to be a student leader on campus, who also just happened to be gay. He “loved” helping students, “not necessarily gay students or straight students,” but all students at his university.

The essence of the HBCU experience. Graduating from an HBCU was even more special for the participants of this study because they were gay men. They were residents of collegiate environments that were generally intolerant of homosexuality, yet they persevered.

Zion felt “proud” to be a part of something greater. As a student leader, he helped to change and shape individuals’ lives at the institution. He highlighted that he did all of these things as a Black gay man at an HBCU.

Thompson’s “triumphant” feeling as an HBCU graduate involved his proving others wrong, and showing them that he could be successful at an HBCU in spite of his being a gay man. Attending an HBCU “forced” him to establish networks that were out of his “comfort zone.”

Quentin was in search of himself as a man with multiple identities while a student at his HBCU. He described feeling as though he was part of a “tribe” as he “was very much caught up in the culture” of Blackness, and becoming comfortable with his sexual orientation.
N’diol felt that his HBCU was “nurturing,” and he described a family-like atmosphere of “people who genuinely care about you, want you to succeed, and know what you’ll face.”

Graduating from an HBCU was an honor for each participant of this study. Each research participant felt extremely proud of his heritage and evolvement as a Black gay man, and credited his HBCU with helping him along his journey of self-discovery. As young professionals and community leaders, the participants attributed much of their post-undergraduate success to attending an HBCU. All of the participants enjoyed reflecting on their experiences, and felt great dignity in being part of the HBCU nexus, a “family” that spanned larger than the HBCU from which they graduated.

Generated Hypotheses

Background

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), moving toward working hypotheses to describe individuals is an intrinsic part of qualitative research. I suggest the following hypotheses about the lived experiences of Black gay men with an undergraduate degree from an HBCU:

1. Coming out while an undergraduate is a significant event for Black gay men who graduate from HBCUs.
2. The coming out process for a Black gay man is smoother when his mother is accepting of his gay identity.
3. Black gay men are victims of homophobia and sexual harassment at HBCUs, and they employ different mechanisms to cope with the abuse.
4. Black gay men who exhibit more “masculine” attributes are less likely to experience sexual harassment than Black gay men who exhibit “feminine” traits.

5. Black gay men experience heterosexism and homophobia in the Black community and mainstream White society. They view the Black community as being generally less accepting of homosexuality. As Black men, they see racism as an issue in mainstream White communities.

6. Black gay men struggle to find institutional support while undergraduates at HBCUs. Their friendship circles are their main source of support.

**Recommendations for Future Study**

*Rationale*

This study is the first scholarly exploration of the experiences of a group of Black gay men whose undergraduate degree came from an HBCU. Although the research produced bountiful results, it also raised additional questions. Further research is needed about the experiences of Black gay students attending HBCUs.

*Post-doctoral study.* A goal of this study was to gain the reflections of four to six research participants, and four men agreed to participate in it. The study produced a great deal of data about their experiences as undergraduates at HBCUs. Future studies on this topic should concentrate on increasing the pool of participants in order to produce results that are even thicker and richer.

*Further research on “masculine” and “feminine” Black gay men.* There were differences between the experiences of the participants of this study who identified as
“masculine” gay men versus those who identified as “feminine” gay men. Further research on this difference is needed, particularly for understanding the experiences of Black gay men.

_A study on Black gay men who succumb to homophobia at HBCUs._ In spite of harassment and homophobia, the participants of this study achieved educational success at an HBCU, and went on to achieve success in their professional pursuits. The results of this study might have been different had the participants succumbed to harassment. Further research is needed about the experiences of Black gay men who succumb to homophobia at HBCUs, and do not graduate.

_A study on “acting White,” and its effect on high-achieving gay Black men._ “Acting White” was an issue that surfaced for some of the participants in this study. As high-achieving students, the participants recounted instances in which they were teased by other Black students for “acting White.” While there is a body of literature that focuses on the phenomenon of “acting White” in high achieving Black students (Bergin, 2003; Harper, 2006; Ogbu, 2004; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus & Harpalani, 2001; Tyson & Darity, 2005), this study produced findings that there is also a need to focus on “acting White” and its effect on students who are Black and gay.

_A study on shame identity in Black gay men._ The research participants expressed levels of shame prior to coming out as gay men. The men described shame in not fitting the scope of “Black masculinity” because stereotypes of homosexuality were in stark contrast to stereotypes of what a Black man should be. Each participant expressed that they were socialized to believe that Black men could not be gay. Thus, shame manifested
through the internalizing of homophobia. The current research on shame identity does not consider the experiences of Black gay men exclusively (Allen & Olsen, 1999; Halberstam, 2005; Hillier & Harrison, 2004; Kaufman, 1992). The findings of this study suggest a need to explore shame identity in Black gay men.

Longitudinal study. The participants in this study were graduates of an HBCU, but did not attend the same HBCU. As such, they talked about their experiences after graduation. Future research might follow a sample of Black gay men at a single HBCU from their freshman year through to graduation. This might affirm or challenge the recollections of the participants in this study.

Experiences of Black lesbians at HBCUs. This study examined the experiences of Black gay men who attended and graduated from an HBCU. Future studies should include the perspectives of Black lesbians who attend HBCUs. This could provide information into the similarities and differences associated with gender, race, and sexual orientation as related to the HBCU environment and society at large.

Recommendations for Practice

Rationale

Although this study included a limited number of research participants who graduated from different HBCUs, it does offer a glimpse into what Black gay men may be experiencing at HBCUs, which should be very useful to administrators, particularly at HBCUs. First and foremost, gay students are deserving of respect at HBCUs, and HBCUs need to be cognizant of that. In general, HBCUs need to evaluate their policies and practices if they want to provide more than a tolerable environment for students who
identify as being homosexual. The participants in this study succeeded despite many obstacles; their success and the success of those who follow them might be far greater in an environment that is both accepting and affirming.

*Develop gay/straight alliances.* Each participant graduated from an HBCU that did not have an official organization geared toward gay students, or fostering positive interactions between gay and straight students. One of the participants identified an “unofficial” gay student group that met off-campus though. HBCUs should consider forming organizations that develop programming to promote an understanding of gay student issues. The membership should consist of both homosexual and heterosexual students, faculty/staff, and alumni. Such an organization would assist in creating a supportive environment on campus for members of the gay community and their allies.

*New student orientation.* New student orientation is a mandatory program at many colleges and universities, and new incoming freshman, transfer students, and parents attend it. The participants of this study were witnesses and victims of homophobia and harassment at their HBCUs. Orientation programs provide a platform to reinforce an atmosphere that is welcoming and diverse. It is critical that sexual orientation is explicitly discussed as an important piece of the multicultural puzzle at HBCUs, and that harassment of any type, including of gay students will lead to punishable consequences. New student orientation is an opportunity for an HBCU to show its pride in welcoming a diverse student population, which includes gay students.

*Create mentorship programs.* The participants of this study were not only developing their identities as Black men, but they were also developing as gay men. Each
participant identified attending an HBCU because he wanted both to develop as a Black man, and to “be around” educated Black people. Each participant’s HBCU introduced him to a wealth of resources, including clubs, organizations, and mentors that aided in his development of a positive self-concept as a Black man.

As gay men though, there was a deficit of resources for the participants. The creation of mentorship programs may aid in fostering HBCU communities that are more accepting of Black gay students who attend. It is important for staff, faculty, and administrators alike to participate in mentorship programs. Their participation reinforces an accommodating environment. Their participation also provides homosexual students with an ally and an adviser.

Build safe spaces. Each participant identified feeling no support at the institutional level as a gay student at his HBCU. As such, each participant was witness to and victims of various levels of harassment based on his gay identity while a student at his HBCU. Each participant was also exposed to homophobic attitudes and discrimination as a student at an HBCU. Creating an HBCU environment that is visibly accepting may be a step toward fostering community amongst homosexual and heterosexual populations.

Gay students, particularly “effeminate” gay men, may feel a sense of comfort when they are able to see that the HBCU is a safe space. There is a need for more institutional support mechanisms at both HBCUs and PWIs. A safe space will be most successful when supported from the top-down. Then, the institution must create a mission statement that informs gay students that the community is safe. It should empower
everyone to be him/herself. It should alert others on campus that homophobia is not acceptable at the institution in any shape or form. Once the mission is created, it must be found throughout administrative departments (e.g., the office of the president) student life departments (e.g., student activities department), and academic departments (e.g., offices of professors, and academic advising departments).

Professional development. A few of the research participants experienced heterosexism by campus officials while students at an HBCU. A campus official asked one of the research participants if he “accepted Jesus” into his life, implying that the participant’s being homosexual was a sin. Another participant was told by a campus official that he should not publicly associate with openly gay students.

From these encounters, it is evident that some practitioners may not be equipped with appropriate skills to serve multicultural student populations, although they may have an interest in creating an accepting environment at HBCUs. It is critical that practitioners are supported and encouraged to take advantage of professional development opportunities. Particular areas of development that practitioners may consider include training on gay and lesbian issues.

The Researcher’s Experiences and Perceptions

Background

Originally, I sought to explore the lived experiences of Black gay male undergraduate students at one of the most prestigious HBCUs. I followed and completed the human subjects’ protocol for research at this institution, but my proposal was never acknowledged, much less approved. I contacted the research office multiple times, and
left my name and contact information with a very friendly office associate each time.

After a few months, I realized that my research proposal was not going to get approved; and that inaction was their way of not welcoming the study on that campus. I contacted the institution’s research office one more time to inform them that I would be withdrawing my proposal. That was the only message that prompted a response. The chairperson of the institution’s research board sent “best wishes” by email.

I dedicated a great amount of time, interest, and care in respect to the institution’s human subjects’ protocol. Had an official from this institution’s research office formally contacted me to inform me of the rejection, I would have felt respected as a researcher whose study was simply not accepted. The institution never acknowledged the proposal; the institution never acknowledged me; I was ignored. I was extremely disappointed with how this institution chose to reject my original research proposal. I speculated that I was a victim of homophobia because of this institution’s inaction. When I received the “best wishes” email after withdrawing my proposal, I felt sure that homophobia was at the root of this institution’s inaction.

This was also a reality check for me. I learned how provocative my research topic was. I knew that it was important that I continue to move forward with my study. From that moment on, I believe that I truly became invested as a researcher. Since I feared that I would go through the same delays at another HBCU, I decided to concentrate on Black gay men who graduated from any HBCU. I decided to rely on the self-reflections of graduates instead of the experiences of current students at an HBCU.
I experienced a wide range of emotions and reactions as a researcher. The participants of this study offered such eye-opening reflections that affected me on a deep level as a participant-observer. I became aware of my subjective reactions to the information that I was receiving (Glesne, 1998). So, I maintained a researcher journal as a means to challenge myself, engage my personal experiences, and question my own perspectives and assumptions. The participants’ reflections on their experiences as Black gay men inspired me to reflect on my own experiences as a Black gay male. These reflections are detailed in Appendix B of this dissertation.

In addition to maintaining a personal researcher journal, I was able to gauge my emotional involvement by reviewing interview transcripts. I listened to and reviewed the interview tapes and written transcripts numerous times. It was important to defend the true nature of the subject and to understand his respective words and the context in which those words were intended (Van Manen, 1990). I also included the research participants in the review of their respective transcripts through member checks. Involving the participants in this process was extremely helpful because my research became a shared process, and the participants took ownership of their own words.

Writing about the lived experiences of N’diol, Quentin, Thompson, and Zion has been quite challenging. I had to make important choices and decisions in terms of what to include in the research findings, and I understood that a different researcher might have made different choices in terms of what to emphasize in the research findings. By collaborating with the research participants and my doctoral advisor, I have honored to the best of my ability the lived experiences of the men of this study.
Summary of my Experiences

“I know that I have been changed.” I learned so much from each participant, and I am extremely grateful for his respective reflections. The participants allowed themselves to be vulnerable during our interviews. At times, I am sure it was challenging for each participant to divulge such personal information, but each participant seemed to find comfort in reflecting on his life at an HBCU. Each participant’s reflections were filled with intense emotion, exploration, discovery, pain, and triumph.

From the participants’ reflections, I was inspired to reflect on my own experiences as a Black gay man in various communities, including my PWI, the Black community, and mainstream society. Being a part of the participants’ reflections, and journaling about my experiences as the participant observer of this study was extremely moving. I found it interesting that the participants’ reflections triggered such deep reflection of my lived experiences as a Black gay man.

I know that I have been changed as a result of this study. Like the participants, I also chose three words that would best describe my experiences as the participant observer in this study. Those words were: cathartic, eye-opening, and inspiring. Choosing these three words was challenging because again, like the research participants, I could not find adequate words to describe my experiences as the participant-observer in this study.

*It was cathartic.* The experience was truly cathartic. Each research participant welcomed me to take part in his personal journey of exploration and discovery. As I traveled with these men into their world of reflections, I could not help but to reflect upon
my own journey as a Black gay male. My journey was emotional, challenging, and uplifting in so many ways. I feel a sense of renewed confidence and growth as a result of going through this experience with the research participants.

*It was eye-opening.* I entered this study with multiple lenses as a participant-observer. The research participants overcame so much while students at their HBCUs, including blatant homophobia, heterosexism, physical violence, and verbal abuse. The men faced not only these hardships at their HBCUs, but they also experienced these things in the general Black community, and mainstream society. The internalization of these negative events seemed to fuel passion within each participant to succeed and to become comfortable with themselves as Black gay men.

*They were inspiring.* The participants of this study were inspiring in numerous ways. I was particularly moved by the strength of each participant. These men surely defy the stereotype that “to be gay is to be weak.” In both adverse and encouraging situations, each participant maintained immense levels of emotional and mental strength. Each participant was charitable in his own way, serving in various communities, providing education to others, and giving back to his HBCU. Alongside his giving back, each participant succeeded in both his graduate, post-graduate, and professional pursuits. The participants therefore are positive role models for anyone, Black, White, homosexual, or heterosexual. They certainly inspired me to examine and to pursue my passions.

**Summary**

This is a phenomenological study of the lived experiences of four gay Black men who attended and graduated from an HBCU. The goal of the study was to learn about the
individual experiences of these men through self-reflections. Data for the study was collected primarily through an autobiographical sketch that each participant completed and individual interviews that were conducted with each participant.

The autobiographical sketches and interviews were transcribed and studied for emerging themes. Eight major themes emerged from this research, which included: deciding to attend an HBCU; coming out at an HBCU; witnessing harassment and homophobia during the college years; being a Black gay male in the Black community; being Black and gay in mainstream society; coping strategies; the significance of attending an HBCU; and summing up the HBCU experience. Each major theme had a series of sub-themes.

Deciding to attend an HBCU involved the college experience and the dynamics of attending an HBCU on scholarship, living on campus, and being part of the “Black experience.”

The participants were students at an HBCU when they came out as gay men. Coming out at an HBCU included the following sub-themes: coming out to self, coming out to others while at the HBCU, coming out to women, coming out to men, coming out to mother, and assuming that people already knew they were gay.

Disclosing their sexual orientation subjected the research participants to witnessing harassment and homophobia during their college years. A few of the participants witnessed low levels of abuse because they “could pass” for being heterosexual. One of the participants experienced physical harassment based on his
sexual orientation. All of the participants either witnessed harassment of fraternity members, friends, college authorities, and family members.

In the general Black community, the participants identified a number of issues they faced as Black gay men. “Black masculinity” was a phrase that most of the participants used when describing the expectation of Black men in the general Black community. The participants also discussed: being called, “faggot;” “acting White” instead of “acting Black;” valorizing violence; having multiple identities; the media projections of Black and gay; the condition of remaining silent; and the notion that not all heterosexual Black people are homophobic.

The participants felt that mainstream White society was generally more accepting of homosexuality than the Black community. However, the participants also felt that they were victims of racism in mainstream White communities, both heterosexual and homosexual. Two of the research participants expressed having no interest in mainstream White culture, and avoided socializing in that setting as much as possible.

The participants coped with homophobia in both the Black community, including their HBCUs and mainstream White society. Each participant internalized homophobia which included: remaining silent about his sexual orientation in order to avoid being harassed or teased; acting homophobic towards other gay students; switching behavior to fit in with predominantly heterosexual communities, and proving himself to be just as good as his heterosexual counterparts.

None of the participants felt institutional support from their HBCUs as gay men. The significance of attending an HBCU therefore centered around finding support. All of
the research participants identified their friendship circles as their main support system. Each participant also identified his religious and/or spiritual connection as being a support system.

Life after an HBCU included each participant feeling that his HBCU indoctrinated him with: desire to give back to the community, passion to seek further education and gainful employment, and pride in being part of the HBCU tradition.

Each participant grew tremendously as Black a gay man as a result of attending an HBCU. As such, the research participants felt: “proud;” “triumphant;” and part of a “tribe.” The participants also described their experiences as students at an HBCU as: “powerful;” “unconventional;” and “nurturing.”
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Appendix A

Biographical Sketch Questionnaire

Please provide a response to each section below. Although listed on this form, at no time during this study will your real name be disclosed. The information from this form will aid in the creation of your biographical sketch for this study.

Name:
Age:
Occupation:
Hometown:
City in which you currently reside:
At which HBCU did you complete your bachelor’s degree?
What did you like best about attending this HBCU? What did you like least about attending this HBCU?
Did you attend any other college(s) prior to this HBCU? If so, which college(s) did you attend?
Have you completed, or are you pursuing graduate/post graduate education? If so, at an HBCU?
At what age did you realize you were same gender loving/gay?
At what age did you openly identify, or come out as being gay?
Do you come from a big family (e.g., only child, siblings; Two-parent, single parent household)?
Please describe your upbringing.
• Were your raised in a religious household?

• Are you ‘out’ to your family?

• What message(s) did you receive about homosexuality?

• Please describe your family’s socioeconomic background (e.g., parent/guardian’s education, profession; neighborhood in which you grew up)

• How would you describe your pre-collegiate experiences (e.g., high school)?

• What is your relationship like with your family today?

How do you define adversity? Please describe an experience during your undergraduate career in which you experienced adversity.

How do you define success? Please describe an experience during your undergraduate career in which you experienced success.
Appendix B

Autobiographical reflections related to each participant

Relating to Zion

I think the thing that most impressed me about Zion was his poise. The man is just so poised and polished. He is definitely an individual who can get along with anyone in any setting. I cannot picture him being intimidated by a challenge. Rather, he is a personality who embraces challenge. He would find pleasure in figuring it all out, and crossing over to the other side. He’s been able to cross to the other side in many facets of his life up to this point.

Would I have been as brave? During our interview, we talked about his pledging for a fraternity while in college. While he eventually was accepted into a band of brotherhood, acceptance did not come without its share of challenges. I admire Zion for being brave enough to come out and announce that he was gay while attending a pre-pledging meeting. I can only imagine the atmosphere leading up to the question and what that must have looked like after Zion stunned them with his response. I have no choice but to take my hat off to him. I wonder if I would have been as brave.

I don’t know. Being a part of a fraternity was never a huge priority for me. Perhaps I felt somewhat similar to Quentin, felt that a gay man pledging a fraternity is merely inviting physical violence against him. More than that though, I believed that being a part of a fraternity would be impossible because of my gayness. Because hyper masculinity is so much a part of the African American male experience, my feeling was that I did not want to be a part of an organization that could define the standards or
prescribe the boundaries of my behavior and mannerisms as a Black man. Nonetheless, I have a great deal of respect for what these organizations represent in terms of their respective missions in providing community service to the Black community.  

*Relating to Thompson*

*I “morphed” too.* I grew up a poor kid in the foster care system from the age of eight years to fifteen years. My biological mother was very much in my life as a support and a parent, but I was not returned to her custody until I was nearly an adult. My mother was college educated, but she suffered mental illness which took over her life, and it affected our family life greatly. She revered education, and instilled that reverence in me. My father was a very handsome man, but I felt very little connection to him, as he was not active in my life.

I remember elementary school, and all the students, Black and White looked the same—we were all from lower to lower-middle class backgrounds. It was not until I entered middle school that I saw difference. I met students whose parents were doctors and dentists. I met students who lived in the extremely wealthy neighborhood such as, “Royal Oak Estates” or “Woodland.” I met students whose parents dropped them off at school in a Mercedes Benz or a Jaguar. I felt ashamed because I did not have those things.

I excelled in school. I was a leader. I was popular. For some reason, at both my middle and high schools, folks involved in extracurricular clubs and organizations were just as popular (if not more so), as folks who were involved with extracurricular sports. I happened to be both athletic and involved in extracurricular clubs. I was class president
for the 3 years of my high school career. I excelled academically. I believe that school was my escape from all of the pain of my home life. I do not know that I felt the pain as much in elementary school because I did not understand the severity of my mother’s condition. I did not understand why I was not shipped to live with aunts or uncles, but forced to live with strangers who took me in their home.

And so, as a student leader, who enjoyed a good amount of popularity, it was only a matter of time before my classmates and friends would become interested in who I was, where I lived, what my parents did for a living. For a long time, I skirted around the topic. I remember after a track meet (I was a sprinter), our coach was taking a group of us home. I recall feeling a flush of anxiety come over me, as my coach would be dropping me off first. This meant that the other athletes, who came from more affluent backgrounds, would actually see the foster house in which I lived.

When the coach dropped me off, one of my teammates said, “Oh, I didn’t know that you lived in this neighborhood.” There was so much power and judgment in that one comment. Rather than admit that I lived “on the other side of the tracks,” I lied. I said, “This is my grandmother’s house.”

That particular situation in which I “morphed” to fit into a certain community spawned a series of morphs in which I became something that I was not. At times, I actually believed the lies that I told. I am not sure if teachers knew the truth. I am not sure who knew the truth. I remember trying to get to lunch before the other students so that they would not know that I was on the free lunch program; and when it was impossible to
get to the lunch room before others, I had a deal with the lunch lady at the register to “act like” I was paying for my lunch.

*Getting back to my truth.* By time I was 15 years old, and a sophomore in high school, I was extremely popular and excelled academically. I resumed living with my biological mother after spending seven critical years in an unloving foster home. Both my friends and those who wanted to be my friend thought that my family life was like *The Cosby Show.* I created the type of home life that I wished I had. In this “pretend” world, my mother was a psychologist, and my father was a lawyer. In this world, we lived in “Royal Oak Estates,” and owned a luxury vehicle, a convertible, and an older car that we drove just around town. The latter vehicle was the only truth that I told of that world.

While I got along with mostly everyone, Black and White, from the “preps” to the “jocks” to the “hoods” to the “goths,” the majority of my friends were White. Throughout this time, I knew that I was gay. Although I endured some teasing, primarily from other Black students, I never lied about my orientation. I never really felt threatened in terms of my gay identity. Rather than assuming I was gay, I believe that many students, especially Black students just thought I was some weird, rich kid who was brought up in the suburbs. That’s what I wanted them, and everyone else to think. At that time, I could not see just how very special I was, just how very special I am. And so, while I encountered some speculation about my gay orientation, I was mostly teased by other Black students for “acting White.”

This little make-believe world was brought to a screeching halt at the end of my sophomore year. On the same day that I learned that I would maintain my class
presidency during my junior year, and attended a National Honor Society ceremony as an inductee, my biological father was murdered. This tragedy made the front page of my hometown’s newspaper. My father’s death forced me to be truthful in many aspects of my life. Then, during my junior year of high school, I was awarded a number of scholarships, one of which was a “courage award,” which, again was featured in the local newspaper. The article exposed my having been a foster child.

*I was free to be me.* I felt relieved. I felt such a freedom to finally be myself. 

There were no more lies that I felt I needed to tell. There were no more lies that I could tell because the local newspaper exposed so much of my truth. Interestingly, none of my high school friends ever challenged me on the lies I told; none of my friends expressed pity towards me (thank goodness); probably because I did not exhibit any self-pity. I have always been a strong person, a quality that I inherited from my mother. Perhaps, others knew my strength, and felt that I would be just fine.

When I was 17 years old, I was once again elected as class president during my final year of high school. My friendships were bountiful, and my academic achievement was excellent. I was parenting my mother as she suffered from mental illness; she continues to suffer to this day. Life was good, and I was no longer living a false existence. However, there was something still missing. It was important for me to live my full truth. At 17 years old, I came out as a gay man, first to my mother, and then to others. It was important that my mother knew first. Losing my friendships because of my disclosure was not as big an issue as the risk of losing my mother’s love. She accepted me with loving, open arms.
Relating to Quentin

I identified with Quentin during our discussion of the verbal and physical harassment that has stalked him since he was a child. Hearing him recount his being called a “faggot” from the first grade through to his adult years, really affected me. Hearing his reflections of being physically assaulted by Black, presumably straight men, really affected me. It was really emotional, especially when he revealed that this harassment was not only at the hands of perfect strangers, but also family members.

I witnessed harassment. I know about the preponderance of sexual harassment because I experienced it as a child in the foster care system. It was not enough for me to experience harassment in the foster care system though. I too was a victim of verbal harassment throughout elementary school to present day from a variety of sources, including my own family. Most of the harassment that I experienced though was from other Black people, both male and female.

My walk was “funny.” I had no choice but to go back into my childhood, and to recount my history with being sexually harassed because of my being a gay male. The memory that was quite vivid was when I was eight or nine years old. I was a foster child, and my foster family and I had taken a trip to the mall. When we returned home, I remember my foster mother and her adult children staging an intervention for me because they claimed that I was “walking funny” at the mall.

“Are you okay?” they asked. “Yeah,” I replied, unknowing and unassuming of the abuse that would follow. “Well, you were walking funny when we were at the mall today,” said my foster mom. I asked, “I was walking funny? How was I walking?” After
asking this question, I was still unassuming. I did not understand why there would be a problem with the way that I walked. I thought they were setting me up for a joke. I soon learned that the joke was on me. My foster mom then proceeded to stand up from the couch in which she sat, and she proceeded to walk in an extremely exaggerated manner, shifting her weight from one hip to the other. She and my adult foster sister (her biological daughter) began to laugh, “That’s how you were walking.” Humiliated, embarrassed, and confused as to why they were doing this to me, an eight or nine year old child, I sharply stated, “No, I wasn’t!” I remember getting up from the chair in which I sat, and running upstairs to my bedroom where I cried myself to sleep.

*My mother protected me.* This incident didn’t stop there. My foster mom actually reported my “walking funny” to my state social worker. My social worker scheduled a meeting to speak with my foster mother and me about this. My biological mother, who had visitation rights to see me, was also told about this meeting, and she was in attendance. My social worker seemed to not understand why we were meeting, but called the meeting perhaps because my foster mom felt it necessary. To this very day, I am extremely grateful that my mother was there. Like the lioness protecting her cub, my mother protected me from harm’s way. I remember her stepping right in there and defending me, “There’s nothing wrong with the way he walks!”

When my foster mom tried to challenge my mother on this, my mother slightly raised her voice, yet remained composed and stern. She looked into the eyes of both my foster mom and my social worker and said, “Now you look, he may not live with me right now, but Obie is my son…my son. He is a child. There is nothing wrong with his
walk. There is nothing wrong with him…period! I will not allow y’all to make him
believe otherwise! Understood?” The room became still in silence, and all eyes, my
mother’s, my social worker’s, and mine were on my foster mother. My mother then
repeated her question in a fashion that suggested consequences if left unanswered,
“Understood?” My foster mother responded softly, “I understand.”

My biological mother was my hero at this meeting. She was my savior. With all
that she has been through, with all that we have gone through together, she has always
been my hero. My mother has always been my savior.

_Relating to N’diol_

N’diol spoke about the family-oriented nature of not only his HBCU, but also the
sense of connection that he had with people of other HBCUs. He spoke of the friendships
that he made while at an HBCU, and how those friendships are still in tact well after his
graduating from college.

_Who were my friends in college?_ This conversation made me think about all of
my friendships as a graduate of a PWI. Basically it was a brief conversation because my
reality is that I made no more than five friends during my undergraduate career. When we
add graduate school to the equation, the total number of friends becomes less than ten.
And so, establishing a bevy of friendships is certainly a component of the college
experience that I missed out on. I certainly didn’t graduate from my alma mater feeling
this sense of family connection, as was the case with N’diol.

_Finding community._ The PWI was an overall good experience for me as a Black
gay male. It certainly was not an easy place to be as a Black gay male. I say this because
it was hard for me to find a community to which I could belong. I never pledged a fraternity because I thought my gayness would be an issue. Even if my being gay were not an issue, I would not have pledged just because I have never had an interest. Though, I loved attending step-shows and watching the different Black fraternities and sororities perform and “represent” their respective chapters. I have never felt out of place at any those events as a gay Black man.

I was not a member of any exclusively Black student groups or organizations. I did attend the campus GLBT meetings, and hoped to connect with other gay students on campus. At each meeting, there were only a handful of people of color, and gobs of White people in attendance. It was interesting communicating with the other individuals of color because many of them would shun each other because they were trying to be seen or acknowledged by White members of the group.

And so, I was never really “at home” in mostly Black groups or mostly gay groups on campus. I spent time in both communities, in relatively small doses. It was outside of my PWI that I became exposed to other Black gay men as I began to go to gay themed events with friends. While these events provided only a glimpse into a certain segment of the gay community, it felt good to be around other men who looked like me, and could identify with me in terms of sexual orientation and ethnicity.

Trying to navigate life as a Black gay man in mainstream gay society was confusing at times. When I turned 17, and went off to college, I thought, “Okay, this is it. My life is going to begin now!” I thought that all gay folks had the experience of being ridiculed and discriminated against. As such, my life in the gay world would be that
much sweeter, and all roses and daisies. I thought because we (the collective gay community) shared in the experience of being discriminated against, I would find an instant connection, and would be instantly accepted into the gay community. I was wrong. This notion really hit home when a White gay man actually called me a “nigger.” I was immediately snapped out of my naïve world of “la la land,” and pulled into the reality that racism is in fact a problem in the mainstream gay community.

I also found it interesting the ways that gay people of color communicated with one another in mainstream culture. That is, when I tried to connect with other Black gay men, or other gay men of color in mainstream culture, I was shunned numerous times. Yet, this particular segment of gay men was extremely friendly towards gay White men. I learned that even within mainstream gay communities of color, there existed intra-group racism. Thus, gay Black men were actually discriminating against me; I speculate it was because I did not fit stereotypical attributes appreciated by mainstream gay culture. I truly have no idea. I learned that intra-group racism in gay communities of color was an issue, and I felt that it was quite unfortunate.

*How would my life have been at an HBCU?* I was lucky though. Throughout college, I had a small, but tight group of friends from all different walks of life. Those friendships continue to be relevant in my life today. There are those who served the purpose of bringing something into my life, or taught me a lesson about life, and moved on. Those individuals are just as important to my college experiences as those who remain in my life today. I wonder what my life would have been like at an HBCU. Would I have come out at an HBCU? Would I have been shunned as a Black gay male? Would I
have dated at all during my time at an HBCU? What meaning would I have attached to attending an HBCU?

I can only imagine what it would be like to have some, most, or your entire faculty and staff know you by name during undergraduate study. I can only recall four professors during my undergraduate career who knew me by my first and last name. I can only imagine what it would be like to have some, most, or all of your peers know you by name. While I would not trade my somewhat phantom-like existence at a PWI, I wonder what my life would have become had I chosen to attend an HBCU.
Appendix C

Interview Guide

Racial/Ethnic & Sexual Identity Development

How do you identify in terms of race/ethnicity?

Please describe some of your most vivid and memorable moments growing up as a Black/African-American man.

Please describe the challenges you have faced due to being a Black/African-American male? Family? Friends? School? Society?

How do you identify in terms of your sexual orientation?

When did you know that you were gay/homosexual? How did you cope with this?

What there same sex attraction up to that point?

How old would you say you were when you could identify that?

Did you date girls to cover being gay, or was that real?

How “out” are you to family? If not very or at all, Why not?

Is your family accepting of your being gay? How do they relate to you?

How would you describe your experiences as a Black gay man in the Black community?

Homophobia?

How would you describe your experiences as a Black gay man living in White majority society? Homophobia? Racism? The mainstream gay community? Racism? (Less homophobia in White community than in Black community)?

Why do you feel that way?
Do you feel that homophobia is greater in the Black community or mainstream, White society?

Please describe your experiences in mainstream White gay culture.

As you developed and became more aware of your orientation, describe the challenges that you experienced with family? Friends? School? Society?

Experiences as a student at an HBCU

Why did you choose to attend an HBCU?

What was your major program of study? Why did you choose that major?

Did you live on campus? Why did you choose that living arrangement?

With whom did you socialize in college?

Did anyone know that you are gay? If so, how did they know?

How did you decide who and when to disclose your sexual orientation? Has this process of disclosing changed over time? Please describe.

How open were you with others on campus about being gay?

How important has coming out been to you?

Did your decision to come out impact any of your relationships? Peers? Professors/staff? Roommates? How so?

Did you meet other gay students? Describe any challenges that you may have experienced with them?

Did you seek membership in fraternity? Did they know about your orientation? If so, how did they know? Please discuss your experiences with the fraternity.

Describe your dating experiences while in college.
Describe your relationship with heterosexual Black students on this campus.

How has being a Black man affected your decisions about coming out? That is, were there certain things that you were taught as a Black man that contradicted with your gay identity?

What could the Black community do to be more accepting? Do you see the community moving towards that? Why/Why not?

What has been your experience with moving back and forth between different groups (e.g., being in a predominantly homosexual setting vs. being in a predominantly heterosexual setting)?

Does success/education of Black gay men lead to more acceptance in the Black community?

How do you feel when making the transitions between different groups?

Have you ever been a victim of or witness to sexual harassment (physical or verbal) or discrimination because of your gay identity?

Describe your experiences with racial, ethnic, or sexual discrimination…on campus? Off-campus? How did you respond?

How did you respond to witnessing others’ harassment?

What groups on campus were most important to you?

Was there a population of down-low (DL) on campus?

Where did you turn for support on campus? Off-campus?

Since coming out and being in college, how would you describe your religious/spiritual beliefs? Social activities? Relationship with family?
Do you think religion is another thing that keeps the Black community from completely accepting homosexuality? Why/Why not?

Describe your biggest challenges being both Black and gay at an HBCU. In the gay community? In the Black community? In society in general?

Describe your greatest rewards being both Black and gay at an HBCU. In the gay community? In the Black community? In society in general?

What could HBCUs do to improve the quality of life for gay Black students?

What advice would you give to a Black gay student who chooses to attend an HBCU?

Please describe your most significant moments or how you made meaning of your time while a student at an HBCU? As a graduate of an HBCU?

What three adjectives would you use to describe the meaning of your time at an HBCU? Please explain.

Have you pursued or completed a graduate degree? A post-graduate degree? At which institution(s) did you complete your graduate/post-graduate work? If you completed your graduate work at an HBCU, please explain why. If you completed your graduate work at a non-HBCU, please explain why.

**Concluding Questions**

How have you felt talking about these issues?

Any questions that you thought I would ask that I did not, and you would like to address now?

Is there anything else that you would like to add that you didn’t get to add earlier?
Appendix D

Ohio University

Human Subject Consent Form

Title of Research: A phenomenological study of the lived experiences of Black gay men with an undergraduate degree from a historically Black college or university (HBCU).

Principal Investigator: Obie Ford III

Department: Counseling and Higher Education

EXPLANATION OF STUDY

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Black gay men who have graduated with an undergraduate degree from various historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

Approximately four-to-six men will be selected to participate in this study. You will be interviewed no more than three times, and each interview will last from 60-to-90 minutes. You will also be asked to provide a brief autobiographical sketch. The study will last approximately three months.

RISKS and DISCOMFORTS

In order to protect you from any foreseeable risk or discomfort, as a participant in this study, you will be assigned a pseudonym in order to protect your identity. At no time during this study will your real identity be revealed. Any person or place that you mention by name during this study will also be protected by confidentiality in this study. The institution from which you graduated will also remain confidential and will be referred to generically with a fictitious geographic location throughout the study (e.g., “he graduated from a small HBCU located on the west coast”). Your participation is voluntary, and you may discontinue participation at any point during the study with no questions asked.

BENEFITS

Your participation in this study will enhance the body of knowledge in higher education as there is no research about the lived experiences of Black gay men who attended and graduated from historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Additionally, sharing your experiences may educate as well as increase understanding in both institutions of higher learning as well as society at large. You may also feel more empowered and encouraged after participating in this study.
CONFIDENTIALITY and RECORDS
All records and personal information about each participant will be stored in a secure location in my home office. Only I, as the primary researcher, will have access to your records. All interviews will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. Following transcription, the audio recordings will be destroyed. Audiotapes will be destroyed within 1 month following transcription of interviews.

All records and the identity of each participant of this study will be confidential. As mentioned above, you will be assigned a pseudonym in order to protect your identity throughout this study. At no time will your real name appear during the research or in the final report. Any person or place that you mention during your interviews will be held in confidence throughout the study and also assigned pseudonyms. The HBCU from which you graduated will be referred to generically with a fictitious geographic location (e.g., “He graduated from an HBCU located on the west coast”).

COMPENSATION
You will not receive any form of compensation for your participation.

CONTACT INFORMATION
If you have any questions at any time about this study, you may contact the primary researcher, Obie Ford III, 1053 Brice Road, Columbus, OH 43068. You may also reach him via email: oford@csc.edu, or by home phone: 614.868.1239.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research, you may contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701, 740.593.0664.

PARTICIPATION
Participation in this study is voluntary. As a participant of this study, you may discontinue participation at anytime, without consequence, no questions asked; any data collected up to that point would be destroyed.

I certify that I have read and understand this consent form and agree to participate as a subject in the research described. I agree that known risks to me have been explained to my satisfaction and I understand that no compensation is available from Ohio University and its employees for any injury resulting from my participation in this research. I certify that I am 18 years of age or older. My participation in this research is given voluntarily. I understand that I may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. I certify that I have been given a copy of this consent form to take with me.

____________________________  ___________________________
Participant’s Signature    Date

____________________________
Printed Name