**Self-Pity**
By: D. H. Lawrence

"I never saw a wild thing
sorry for itself.
A small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough
without ever having felt sorry for itself."

## INTRODUCTION

### One of Few: My Story

It was a day in February 2002 and it was nine in the morning, I remember sitting in freshman English, delirious with sleep. We just completed reading *Passing* (1986), a short novel about bi-racial passing as White in America during the mid 20th century. I found the novel to be very intriguing; I had never been the student to engage much in class discussions, especially since I did not feel comfortable amongst my peers. Then it happened… "Being one of the three African American students in the class, Candice how do you feel about this book?" I looked up from my book and could not believe that the professor had addressed me in such a manner. My middle-aged White English professor had just addressed me to the entire class by my race. More importantly, she made it a point to address me because I am African American and the women in the novel are African American and issues of "passing" as White are debated. I had so many swirling emotions after being addressed in such a manner. I felt as if I was supposed to be the token Black person for my race and express how I feel regarding this novel, as if I automatically was able to identify just based on my race. Once again, resounding in my head was this idea that I am expected to speak for the entire race. I was very hurt by this incident, this feeling was intensified as I was well aware the opinions and mindsets of some of my close-minded White peers.

I confronted the professor after class and strolled across campus to my sanctuary commonly known as the African American Cultural Center. Upon entering, I immediately said aloud, “This is my last semester here.” Familiar faces came to my aide as I told my story from earlier and saw myself reflected in my peers’ faces. These students were my friends, associates; most importantly they knew the plight I was dealing with daily as they experienced the same things being African American at ta predominantly white university (PWI). With a few kind words combined with a sense of safety, this space was where I was celebrated because of history and accomplishments.

I quickly reminded myself that I know who I am and I was not just one of the three African American students in the class. My friends knew who they were and they were not just a part of that small percentage of African Americans that attended the university. I earned a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree through this program/university. Years later, I know the African American Cultural Center had a lot to do with my persistence towards graduation. It was the cultural sameness, the positive space for appreciation and celebration of my identity, and the bond of togetherness to fight the racism and injustices we experienced daily making it necessary to have the African American Cultural Center as a sanctuary.

I am sharing my narrative with the reader to show how I came to this research project through reflection of my own personal experiences at a “Big 10”, predominantly white institution (PWI). As an African American undergraduate student attending a PWI, I found myself attracted to events, activities, friends, organizations, etc. which were African American focused (by name or social/political intent). Reflecting on my experiences, I began to wonder why I gravitated toward these students, activities, and study groups. Not until almost five years later did I realize I was practicing self-affirmation by placing myself in circles of encouragement and support

which acknowledged my self-image. These circles of encouragement focused on my needs (social, political, educational, and emotional) as a student. These needs I had as a student were part of my process of self-affirmation and desire of having a positive self-image. I subconsciously self-affirmed both as a means to cope in my campus environment and to keep persisting toward college graduation. The realization of my own self-affirmation process drove me to understand how other African American students experience higher education.

**Topic: Self-affirmation, self-determination and success of African American students**

For my dissertation I looked at self-affirmation as a form of self-determination for African American students in higher education and its connection to collegiate success. As Bunyan et al. discussed in *Affirmed yet Unaware: Exploring the Role of Awareness in the Process of Self-Affirmation*, self-affirmation theory began with the idea of people being motivated to maintain a sense of value and worth of the self-image, identity, integrity and not their perceived worth (Bunyan et al., 2009). I examined if these motivations to self-affirm had a direct relationship to self-determination.

The key terms for the dissertation are self-affirmation and self-determination. In looking at self-affirmation, Bunyan et al. (2009) defined it as "the process by which people maintain a sense of self-integrity… a perception of themselves as globally moral, adequate, and efficacious when they confront threats to a valued self image" (p. 2). This sense of self-worth is achieved through the "psychological immune system," which is situated to protect oneself when placed in a conflicting, threatening or hostile situation or environment (Bunyan et al., 2009). In addition to self-affirmation, I define self-determination as a concept of collectiveness, done as a group while the motivations/desires of the group are their driving force toward a goal.

**Self-affirmation.** Previous research on self-affirmation by Bunyan et al. (2009) found two major outcomes when relating it to performance, changes in judgment and heightened awareness. One major outcome of the study suggested people were unaware when they are practicing self-affirmation. Once they were aware of this practice, the positive effects it had were slightly lowered. The second major outcome in the study is the usage of implied self-affirmations. These implied self-affirmations reduce a defensive response to a threat to the self-image. In looking at this topic, I focused on: 1) what self-affirmation looks like, 2) benefits for African American students in their campus environments and 3) how it impacts their judgments. Focusing on changes in judgment and their motivations in the self-affirmation process, I wanted to understand the connection between self-affirmation and self-determination. This interest in a possible connection between self-affirmation and self-determination arose from my own personal experiences. While I was self-affirming by placing myself in culturally specific environments, activities and organizations, the self-affirmation drove me to connect with like-minded peers wanting to change the racial climate at my institution and society as a whole. We focused on changing this racial climate through excelling academically to prove we belonged at the institution. Through our efforts in various organizations, we also supported African American's attending the university, those in the surrounding community and our home neighborhoods. These collective efforts focused on providing awareness of racial sensitivity, equality and exposing the racism hiding behind education policy, funding, and the legal system.

**Self-determination.** Self-determination theory is the "investigation of people's inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs that are the basis for their self-motivation and personality integration" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 3). This self-motivation consists of two types: intrinsic and extrinsic. These motivations can be produced by the desire to do something

because one enjoys it (intrinsic), or the desire to do something to gain praise or avoid chastisement (extrinsic), and are a continuum of one another (Noels, et al, 2000). There are three levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation which exists within education. These three levels of intrinsic motivation are:

1. Knowledge: feelings of gaining knowledge
2. Accomplishment: sensations of achievement
3. Stimulation: aesthetic appreciation

And the three levels of extrinsic motivation are in order from the least self-determining to the most determining:

1. External regulation: motivation due to tangible benefits or costs
2. Introjected regulation: motivation from outside pressure to perform
3. Identified regulation: motivation from personal relevancy to the larger societal

(Noels, et al, 2000).

I further expand this definition of self-determination to include a desire to do something because it appeals to one's sense of humanity. This addition to the definition of self-determination can be exhibited through historical examples of the Civil Rights Movement, SNCC and Freedom Schools and Black Panther Party (Klarman, 1994; Perlstein, 1990; Umoja, 1999).

In my research I was curious regarding a perceived connection between the valued sense of self impacted by culturally specific events/activities, environments, social peer networks, [1] (self-affirmation) and the self-motivation (self-determination) process to succeed academically, physically, and mentally in their collegiate careers (Bunyan et al., 2009; and Deci et al, 1991). I

[1] This list is not exhaustive of the types of activities students participate in; however, I list these three as the focus of this project.

was also interested noting if, the students were self-determined and exhibited intrinsic or extrinsic motivations.

With this ability to choose one's actions in accordance with one's psychological needs, self-determination has allowed a person to be able to look at their personal situation in a larger context compared to others (Deci, 1980). Self-determination is a way for people to be able to assess the needs and problems that are affecting their community in order to be able to change situations and circumstances for the better (Wright, 1989).

"When applied to the realm of education, [self-determination theory], is concerned … with promoting in students interests in learning, a valuing of education, and a confidence in their own capacities and attributes" (Deci et al, 1991, p. 325). In other words, I was interested in how their valued sense of self motivates them in learning and persistence toward graduation.

Pulling from the strengths of the definitions and descriptions of self-determination, there appeared to be three main components to self-determination: motivation, assessment of needs and problems facing others like them (community), and taking control over one's own affairs/quality of life. I defined self-determination as the preservation/survival tool to maintain self-affirmations.

**Prior Research**

After gathering definitions of self-affirmation and self-determination I turned to the higher education literature to see what the research said about African Americans. Prior research in higher education concerning African Americans has focused on academic success: predictors, hindrances, and retention (Harrell et al., 2005; and Harper, 2005, 2009), alternative learning (Oldenburg, 1991, 2001; and Harper, 2005), and campus racial climate (Ceja, Solorzano, and Yosso, 2000). However, a majority of the previous research gives a deficit, or impaired

perspective on African American students in higher education. For example, African American students are often referred to in education literature as lacking familial influences to motivate them to attend college, (Perna, 2000). This example, among many others found in the education literature, is why I brought a positive perspective to the literature instead of perpetuating the already negative connotations associated with African American students.

I brought a positive perspective to higher education literature by focusing on the student voice as to why African American students participated in, and what they gained from these culturally specific events/activities, environments, and social peer networks. There also was a disconnect in higher education research, neglecting to note the similarities and/or differences between experiences of African American students at historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) and predominantly white institutions (PWI). I was interested in the similarities/differences among college experiences of these students and their connection to culturally specific events/activities and environments. I bridged the gap in the higher education literature by comparing the experiences of African Americans at HBCUs and PWIs. In my study I searched to find if the experiences between these African American students at HBCUs and PWIs have more similarities than presently noted in research. To learn more about the experiences of African American students, I interviewed students at both a HBCU and PWI to add their collegiate stories into conversation with the higher education literature.

The most important gap in the literature I wanted to focus on was previous research that examined the phenomenon of African Americans participating in culturally specific events/activities, environments, and social peer networks as self-segregation (Aboh & Lomotey, 2009; Brown & Davis, 2001; Cooper & Datnow, 1996; Harrell, et al, 2005). Self-affirmation was not mentioned in the discussion concerning this phenomenon in previous higher education

research, which I argued is vital to understanding why African American students choose to participate in culturally specific events/activities, environments, and social peer networks. I agree with Steele (1997) who explains, "to sustain school success one must be identified with school achievement… that one has the interests, skills, resources, and opportunities to prosper there…. That one belongs there, in the sense of being accepted and values" (p. 613). I argued that the self-affirmation, in which African American students are participating, is their way of identifying with school achievement, a sense of belonging and value of self in their collegiate environments.

In order to understand the collegiate experiences of African Americans in higher education, self-affirmation, and self-determination, I asked the following six research questions:

1. How do African American students practice or engage in acts of self-affirmation at traditional institutions (PWIs and HBCUs)?
    a. What are the types of self-affirmation students are practicing at each institution?
    b. Does this practice of self-affirmation look differently at a PWI versus an HBCU? And if so, how?
2. What are these students perceived notions of success?
3. Why have these students chosen their institutions?
4. Why do these students choose to participate in culturally specific events/activities, environments, social groups, etc.?
    a. Are these examples of self-affirmation?
    b. How do they change the definition of self-affirmation, if at all?
5. Do these students see their choice to self-affirm as an inhibitor or facilitator to success?
6. Do these students perceive self-affirmation to have an impact on their desire to self-determine as it relates to their definition of success?

a. How do these acts of self-determination look at each institution?

In the remaining chapters of my dissertation I begin each chapter with a snapshot of my collegiate experience, exhibiting a personal connection to my study. I un-fold my study in the remaining four chapters of my dissertation in order to answer my six research questions. In chapter two I present a literature review. The literature review consists of literature from multiple disciplines (higher education, law and psychology) in order to make meaning of the experiences of African American college students. I push-back against these literatures, offering new viewpoints concerning self-affirmation, self-determination and success.

Chapter three details my methodological choice for using interviews, narrative inquiry, grounded theory and critical race theory to illustrate student voice and the centrality of race to the study. The usage of poetry is also discussed as means of demonstrating my re-construction of the participants' story.

The fourth chapter of my dissertation presents my findings of the study. I found there to be six major findings from the study which will be discussed in great detail. These findings lead to the final chapter five. In this chapter I state my personal dilemmas when conducting the research, limitations of the study and my reflections.