# METHODOLOGY

## THE Frat House

BOOM! BOOM! Music echoed from one of the local fraternity houses and I walked by as I thought nothing of it. Students were lined up outside waiting to enter and I thought they were dressed oddly, but I was too far away to make any conclusions. The very next day it headlined the university newspaper, RACIALLY THEMED PARTIES. What I thought I saw from a distance had become a terrible reality.

The students lined up outside of the fraternity house that late night in 2004 were Caucasian dressed in stereotypical attire of Mexican Americans. The party's theme was Cinco De Mayo (day of celebration of the victory of the Mexican army over the French army). The article detailed the dress of the students who attended the party. Female students were dressed with big t-shirts, pillows underneath their shirts to give the illusion of being pregnant, and a baby in their arms. Male students wore baggy jeans and white undershirts. This racially themed party, according to the newspaper article, was one of many which had occurred that semester. Another party which had taken place was the Black party, where students were dressed in Black face, wore lots of jewelry, and baggy pants. These parties were occurring at my university and other universities across the nation. The minority population on campus was in an uproar. Things were now getting out of hand and it was time to unite and take action.

The African American students, already having a close relationship with the Latino community, banned together with other minorities and cultural centers on campus to address this matter. Our mission: to demand our voices be heard.

**Student Voice**

After reading much of the research literature on African American students in higher education I found the literature does not highlight the student voice. In this chapter I am going to describe to you my methodology choice which focuses on emphasizing their voices. I used interviews, narrative inquiry, and grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to allow the participants' voice to be heard, but I also used critical race theory (CRT) (Ceja et al., 2000) to demonstrate the importance of race. Poetry is used to re-present the participants' quotations to accentuate the constructivism of their stories to remind the reader this is a partial replication of their experiences. Concluding this chapter I produced a guiding theory based on the findings of the study.

**Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry as a research design provided a means for me to get at the complexity of a person's perspective in a way few other methods allow, especially quantitative. For example, ethnography focuses on a site but does not get at the complexities of an individual's experience, ie ethnography looks at the school and narrative inquiry looks at the individual story of the student.

Narrative inquiry permits the researcher and reader, alike, to think about how the participant is constructing the story. It also enabled me, the researcher, to think about how I was constructing the participants' story and recognize the biases I brought to this construction.

As previously stated, narrative inquiry allows the researcher and participant to focus on the construction of the story, but it also permits meaning making to occur. Narrative inquiry gave me the ability to focus on understanding the participant's

perspective of the story and understanding how they viewed their experiences. Therefore, I was able to tie everything in the research back to focusing on the participant voice (Creswell, 2008). This design forces the researcher and reader to think about how the participant is telling their story as well. To understand self-affirmation and its impact, or lack thereof, on success for African American students it is important to be able to understand how they view their collegiate experiences, recognize my own personal narrative/bias, and know the researcher/participant relationship as a working one.

There are many definitions of narrative inquiry in the education literature. Hans Hansen (2006) defines narrative inquiry as "provid[ing] meaning by describing and creating the relationships between ideas which we act on" (p. 1049). In *The Politics of Personal Narrative Methodology*, Peterson and Langellier (1997) define narrative inquiry as "embrac[ing] the dialectic relations of person (identity) and narrative (experience) through the study of persons narrating and the study of narratives of the person" (p. 137). In *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research Creswell* (2008) offers his definition of narrative as "describe[ing] the lives of individuals, collect[ing] and tell[ing] stories about people's lives, and writ[ing] narratives of individual experiences" (p. 512). Overall, I agree with Langallier & Peterson's (1997) definition of narrative inquiry as stated by Hall (1992) "the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual" (p. 136). After reading all of these definitions, I defined narrative inquiry as presenting and representing life stories of those often stereotyped and marginalized, as a means of speaking back to and confronting these preconceived notions and negative ideas.

After realizing this design coincided with the focus of what I wanted to achieve in my dissertation, I looked at the strengths of the design to see if my plans for my study truly matched with the design. In conducting my research it is very important I used a design which allowed for an analysis of various texts. Examining texts allowed me to understand complexities and contradictions of one person's narrative. I was able to see the context of their story, which is important because I was attempting to note the complexities that arise in their narratives. Both the written text and the context which the story is being told can be analyzed. An analysis of these texts allows the reader to have multiple interpretations of participants' words, interpreting voice in various ways. The revealing of motives is useful when thinking of my research as I attempted to find the motivations, both conscious and unconscious, as to why African American students choose to self-affirm by participating in culturally specific events/activities, environments, or social peer networks.

This design ultimately "amplifi[es] the voice of those who have not been heard before, making it particularly useful for the political struggles of less-advantaged individuals and groups, providing a basis for advocacy… particularly useful in giving voice to underrepresented groups" (McQueen & Zimmerman, 2006, p. 477). The African American students in my study, I argue, are a part of an underrepresented group and not just because they are part of the minority based on race, but because they are the minority in undergraduate degrees received and in certain fields of employment (Perna, 2000).

I chose narrative inquiry as my research design because of the personal narrative I was able to share, and also because of the role of the researcher and participant. As I am

extremely close to this research due to my own personal experiences throughout my collegiate career, I have been concerned about adding my own personal experience or interpretation of an experience to someone else's, falsifying their personal accounts. According to Coutler (2009) states in her response to comments on *Finding the Narrative in Narrative Research*, that the third person narrator, or researcher, can fill in and give details that might be left out by the participant. The researcher can provide a natural flow to the narrative by adding in those details which will allow the reader to transition from scene to scene easily. I return to this topic in section four in the chapter as to discuss in more detail this tension.

Another role of the researcher in the narrative is to provide the reader with the ability to deal with dramatic events or narratives which the participant shares, giving a cushion for the reader to which to engage and interpret the narrative (Coutler, 2009). For example, if a participant recounted a dramatic event, I was able to warn the reader of this dramatic encounter prior to retelling of their experience. I was also able to choose different words for description, while providing the same context, as to allow the reader to deal with the experience shared. Wording the narrative in a way where the reader is able to deal with dramatic events is something which I had never thought about or took into consideration until now. This idea in itself forced me to think about the possibilities of the narratives I could hear and have to re-tell should I choose this design.

**Concerns about Narrative Inquiry.** Two main areas of concern arose for me from the literature as major weaknesses of this design: participants' role in the narrative process and the context of the narrative. The first weakness which appeared in the methodology literature, participant's role in the narrative process, became a concern due

to the partiality of the participant's story. I was and am aware the participant's story is always partial and always changing whenever we interview someone. The role of the participant to the narrative is one that places a lot of trust in the participant, as they are giving an account of an event, experience, etc. which is personal to them. Coutler (2009) suggests participants who collaborate or work with researchers over long period of times may begin to tell their story differently. The altering of the story can occur due to the participants' awareness of the researchers' stance and opinions regarding their story. This awareness by the participant can cause the participant to subconsciously change their story based on an idea of how they wanted their story to be re-told.

During my study I noticed three signs the participants exhibited that lead me to believe there was more to their story then they were telling me. The first signal that demonstrated there was more to the story was when the interview was completed and recorder turned off the participant continued to talk. There was a level of comfort that existed when the recorder was off then when it was on. Tre from Justice University admitted after the interview there were some things he did not want to state on the recorder, but wanted to discuss with me privately.

The second sign there were omissions in the stories was constant pausing or hesitation by the participant. This sign was the most popular and occurred during every interview. Constantly the participants would pause, look around or look at me as if they were battling with my trustworthiness of what they were about to share.

Finally, the third signal I encountered during interviews was the presence of contradictions during the interview. Some participants would make a statement about their collegiate career and later in the interview state something completely contradictory.

I was not sure the cause for this alteration but, it is difficult to avoid. In my personal experiences I have found the more I re-tell a story the more it changes. These changes may be slight, but I have found that I begin to believe the “new” story to be the truest account versus its original version. I expected the participants in my study to exhibit this as well. For example, a participant may omit certain parts of the story due to a traumatic account (Creswell, 2008). While this is completely understandable and able to gain empathy by the researcher, this is leaving the story to only be a different version of original story the participant was charged to share. Asking someone to recall negative racial incidents can lead to a slightly altered version of the story being reported; this is normal and likely unavoidable. While this is what many think when thinking of a narrative this is not always the case. Narrative inquiry is not about getting at the truth, but about how the participant, researcher, and reader make sense of the narrative and the construction of the story, providing multiple ways of telling a story.

As previously mentioned there is a benefit to the researcher taking on the third person narrator role; however, I did have some concerns with the researcher’s dual role as researcher and narrator. The story is always shaped by the researcher due to the partiality of the participants’ story. This third person narrator allows for the research to place “space fillers” in the participant’s narrative, but this is a very thin line. If a researcher is not careful they can easily forget the guiding morals they are to follow when conducting this research and contribute things to the narrative the participant might not necessarily agree with. This agreement between the researcher and participant as to what the interpretation of the narrative should be is a working relationship.

The second concern when utilizing narrative inquiry for this study is the story is always being shaped by the researcher; they are never absent and always bringing their biases. The participant might not always agree with the interpretation being stated by the researcher causing them to feel as if their story is being modified and no longer truly their story. As a result of this disagreement the participant voice can be lost during the final write-up of the research. Differences in the point of view of the narrators can become blurred in the final write-up as well, leaving differences in reliability, authorial distance, and tone (Coutler, 2009). This is a struggle researcher's encounter as they attempt to re-tell the story with the addition of their interpretation and acting as third person narrator. Creswell (2008) does offer a solution for avoiding losing the participants voice in the write-up phase of the research, he states that direct quotes can allow researcher to overcome this very issue.

**Theoretical Framework**

To stay true to my participants' voices I used grounded theory to construct a theory which emerges from their voices and CRT to highlight the role of race. My dissertation research is guided by grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and CRT (Ceja et al., 2000). Both theories work together to formulize a new theory which examines the phenomenon of self-affirmation, self-determination, and collegiate success for African American students. I discuss the frameworks together to provide rationale for how they are essential for this study.

**All Together: Grounded theory, CRT, and Narrative Inquiry**

Grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and CRT allowed for the participants' voice to be recognized in regard to their collegiate experience, as well as, the perceptions of these students regarding self-affirmation, self-determination and success. Grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) allows me to focus on how participants make their own meanings. CRT begins with the starting point that racism is endemic and uses counter-story telling as one of the methods to demonstrate it.

**Grounded Theory.** Researchers have defined grounded theory as a method that articulates theories as they emerge from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Martin, 1986; Urquhart, 2010). Grounded theory is a theory that allows themes, categories, and sub-categories to emerge. The themes, categories, and sub-categories are concepts which have risen from the data to produce a theoretical explanation of the phenomenon being studied (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). These themes, categories, and sub-categories are able to develop from the data as grounded theory does not have set tenants or rules to analyze the data. Martin (1986) describes the development of a grounded theory as a "theory discovery model" (p.1). Grounded theory is the opposite of the scientific method as I immersed myself into the data to see what surfaced by looking for patterns and contradictions. Urquhart (2010) adds to Martin's definition of grounded theory as it is a constant data collection and analysis done simultaneously. Overall, I utilized grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to create a theory from the ground up by looking at what the African American students have to say about their collegiate experiences and perceptions of success. In doing so, for my first stage of data analysis I did not enter the study with a preconceived hypothesis, but I allowed the realities of the students to begin

to shape the ideas, concepts, and categories for the theory itself which allowed me to be open to other concepts and categories that I may have missed. For the second stage of data analysis I used tenants from CRT to analyze. By noting the repeated concepts I was able to develop categories for which the concepts appeared under. This later helped in developing a theory from the study and possibly expanding CRT (Ceja et al., 2000). Barney Glaser and Anseum Strauss (1967) define grounded theory as the development of a "well integrated set of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 5). Based in symbolic interactionism, grounded theory "stress[es]… people construct their own realities from the symbols around them through interaction, therefore individuals are active participants in creating meaning in a situation (Cutliffe, 2000, p. 1477). In examining this social phenomenon of collegiate experiences, grounded theory deals with the actors' perceptions and meaning-making about the situations and things they encounter and their choices (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Building on the perceptions and meaning-making regarding the collegiate experiences of African American students, gives a foundation to begin to focus patterns and develop categories to understand how these students make meaning of their self-affirmations, self-determination, and their definition of success (Cutliffe, 2000).

**Critical Race Theory.** CRT (Ceja et al., 2000), birthed from critical legal studies, focuses on the idea that racism is embedded into the American society and therefore integrated into normalcy of American life (Gillborn et al., 2009). Founded by Derrick Bell, Charles Lawrence, Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, Lani Guinier and Kimberle Crenshaw, CRT looks to expose the racism built into our societal structures and uses story-telling as a means to do so (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Gillborn et al., 2009). CRT

helped me to analyze the social structures being experienced by the participants by historicizing the analysis to see how race is always a factor in the collegiate experiences.

CRT places the reader's attention to focus on the counter-story told by the participants. Story-telling allowed me to examine driving forces behind engagement in culturally specific events/activities while exposing racist societal structures or campus racial climate these students find themselves obtaining a degree of higher education.

There are six theoretical tenets upon which critical race scholars collectively agree upon:

1. "Recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. Expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy.
3. Challenges a historicism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law… racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage.
4. Recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society. For example, I need to hear their voices, see how they create stories, and then re-present the stories that reflect their unique experiences.
5. Interdisciplinary.
6. Works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression (Dixson & Rousseau, p. 9, 2005).

CRT focuses on race to expose underlying racist structures built into society. CRT looks at claims of race neutrality and I argue this racial neutrality is hidden in the

realms of diversity, through a historical lens and analysis. The voice of minorities is depicted through story-telling in this framework to break chains of oppression through silencing and non-inclusion. By being interdisciplinary, CRT strives to end the racial oppression experienced daily by minorities. Within CRT, this concept is referred to as naming their own reality and is seen in comparison to the views others have of the students. By naming their own reality, these students can expose institutional/societal racism and "challenge racist assumptions [and the deficit language used in higher education literature in reference to them] and design the research to be part of the solution and not part of the problem" (Parker & Stovall, 2004, p. 174). My study utilized CRT, by "attempting to interject [a] minority cultural viewpoint" into a realm of education which commonly discusses African Americans without their viewpoint (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 13). "Connect[ing] with the experiences, ways of thinking, believing, and knowing the racial communities in their struggle for self-determination and equity" allowed for the redefinition of concepts/terms and positive language to be used when discussing African American students in higher education literature (Parker & Tate, 2004, p. 175).

**Placing Myself in the Research**

The researcher/participant relationship is something researchers have been trying to grapple with in the methodology literature. The idea of the researcher placing themselves into the context of the narrative has been problematic at times. For example, in Lois Presser's (2005) study of men who have committed violent crimes she quickly found herself being placed into the context of the narrative by a participant. "The interview and I were tangibly assimilated into this story of who Dwight is today. Dwight

verbally positioned me as female “other, whom he had formerly abused and whom he now assists” (p. 2079). Dwight placed Presser in the context of the narrative as he re-told his life experiences and reflected on his violent act of rape. As Dwight had placed Presser in the context of his life experiences, I anticipated I could also be placed into the narrative by my participants as well. I came to this realization as I began to think about how my participants might interact with me during the interview and what information I would share about myself and my experiences. Having some basic commonalities (e.g., being African American and having collegiate experiences), I anticipated the participants to find it easy to place me into the context of their experiences.

As in any research process there are various power constructions that are in existence. In the researcher’s role and the participants alike this power looks different depending on which role you play during the process. Overall, the researcher’s power exists in the construction of the narrative itself. When stating construction of the narrative I am referring to those deliberate measures the researcher takes that the participant may be unaware. As the researcher, I had already decided which question(s) I would use to deliberately guide the participant to respond in a certain manner, adding questions along the way as needed. I also have the power to conduct the research in a manner that directs them toward an outcome they desire. This shaping of the product of the research is achieved by taking deliberate steps before, during, and after the interviewing of the participants. Careful selection of the participants for the study, how the researcher links patterns in the narratives, and how the researcher writes the findings in the final report, all help to shape the research toward the researchers focus for his/her study (McQueen & Zimmerman, 2006).

Another aspect of the construction of the narrative connecting the researcher and the power construction is personal bias. My personal experiences of attending a PWI and having participated in culturally specific events/activities and social peer networks have forced me to recognize my own biases with this research project. In the analysis section of my dissertation I dedicate some time to discussing these biases as I worked through them by journaling my own experiences and feelings during the data collection and write-up phases of the research project. Journaling kept me aware of my biases and any new ones which arose during the course of the study. I also used the journaling in regards to the limitations of the study which will be discussed further in the conclusion section. Generally speaking, journaling is the tool I used to practice reflexivity. As stated by Linda Finlay (2002), reflexivity allows researchers to *out* their biases. By using this tool I was constantly being self-aware of my thoughts, feelings, assumptions and motivations regarding my research to "identify forces that might skew the research in particular directions" (Finlay, 2002, p. 536).

In *The Dreamkeepers*, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) utilized the personal narrative of her teaching experience to provide a backdrop to the sections in her book. She was able to recognize her subjectivity in terms of her experiences as an African American student by stating her experiences. I utilized this same technique in my research and use 'I' throughout the dissertation as I recognize that it is my personal experience which drew me to this topic. Revealing my own subjectivity as an African American college student allowed me to be upfront concerning my own personal connection and possible biases with the research.

My process of reflexivity follows Finlay's (2002) technique of applying the analysis to three phases of the research process: preresearch, data collection, and data analysis. As she offered an example of reflexivity in the preresearch phase from Fischer and Wertz, they "agreed, as a sensitizing technique, to jot down notes about [their] personal experiences" as related to their research project (Finlay, 2002, p. 537). I mimicked this same process by keeping a separate journal from fieldnotes to jot down my own experiences, both positive and negative, while attending the PWI, my self-affirming activities and what I assumed I would find when conducting the research.

After having an initial idea of how I felt about my research and any preconceived notions, I moved on to the data collection phase. In the data collection phase I continued the reflexivity analysis in order to avoid misrepresenting or omitting data. Journaling her personal feelings, Finlay (2002) was able to recognize her own irritations with a participant she was interviewing for her study and realize how her personal feelings could impact what data she chose to include and that which she did not. Writing down her thoughts before and after an interview allowed for the identification of the participant-researcher relationship (Finlay, 2002). Recognition of this relationship placed me in a position to have an honest conversation with myself regarding the interview questions I was asking in the interviews. I was able to notice if I was leading the participants to answer questions a certain way, asking the right questions to come to the data I was trying to obtain, etc. This analysis also provided me with a checks and balances system for which to conduct better interviews as I continued the data collection phase.

In the last phase, data analysis, ambivalence was the focus when practicing reflexivity. I was also aware of my already passionate feelings toward PWIs and their

campus racial climate and treatment of minority students. Cognizant of my sensitivity concerning PWIs and race relations, I wanted to make sure I was not placing my own experience above those of the participants. I wanted to recognize any inner conflict which may arise from conducting this research so I focused on the participant voice. As Finlay (2002) was able to recognize her own behavior toward a participant and how it changed her perception of the data because of this perception, I wanted to make sure I was able to identify such things as well as to not misinterpret findings.

While I was aware of the challenges of reflexive analysis (difficulty understanding my own experiences, focusing too much on my own experiences v. participants and the time commitment), this process forced me to recognize my biases to be able to separate them from valid data and findings (Finlay, 2002). The reflexivity analysis is a tool I used as a means of ensuring I was not taking too much power as the researcher in this process.

One of the most important exercises of power during research is the researcher's ability to state in the final write-up or report that they are skeptical with parts of the narrative (Coutler, 2009). This allows the researcher to point out these fallacies adding their personal reading of the narrative for analysis purposes. As I stated earlier a weakness of narrative inquiry as a research design is the participants might change their story, leave out important details or falsify parts of their story. The researcher having the ability to state their skepticism and address it in their final report acknowledges this very issue and allows readers to make a better formulated decision about the narrative knowing some of it could be modified from its original version.

When trying to mesh the concepts of being true to participant voice and being skeptical at the same time, I found it difficult to do so. The indication of false consciousness arises as the participant might not be able to recognize certain aspects, etc. about their situation as a researcher might. This idea of having a very different perspective/belief or even false belief despite the situation and being disadvantaged from it is something I am still trying to grapple with (Jost, 1995).

**Power Relationships**

I chose a method that allowed me to be collaborative and recognizing power constructions with the participant throughout the study, excluding poem construction. Throughout the research process there is also a power relationship in place between the researcher and the participant. The researcher and participant work together to co-construct the story or experience they are attempting to tell. Working together gives a checks and balances for the researcher and participant. They are able to have a discussion concerning interpretations and understandings, giving the research the ability to stay true to the participant's story as possible. Working with participants and getting their insight into my research is something I was very insistent that I do when conducting my own research. I was very concerned about the colonization of the participants work and this can and does occur often, in my opinion and Coutler (2009) agrees. Due to the construction of power and that many participants are not shown the final write-up of their narratives before submitted for publishing, etc., these checks and balances throughout the process ensures colonization does not occur. As Creswell (2008) points out the collaboration between the researcher and participant is important to combat this

colonization. Negotiating all field texts is when conducting this research is also another means to avoid colonization of the narrative.

Another power relationship between the researcher and participant which was unclear in the methodological literature concerning the strengths and weaknesses of narrative inquiry was the position of the researcher and the power they appear to exhibit to the participant. As Presser (2005) notes in her research after recalling a struggle with Dwight over breaking a rule of no smoking inside the rehabilitation house, “I found that the men were not the only ones to position me in gendered ways. I did so myself. To ease the tension after the power struggle” (p. 2080). Presser’s (2005) power struggle with her participants presented itself with sustaining control of the interview. She realized in order to keep control and gain the answers to her questions she had to navigate this power struggle carefully and position herself where her participants would continue to see the relationship as positive and continue in the study. The ability to be aware of the researcher’s positioning as it appears to the participant is very important and this is something I was aware when conducting interviews. If this is not negotiated carefully the participant can easily take over the interview, leaving me without the answers to my research questions.

The literature points out the power relationship between the researcher and the participant, but there is also a power relationship for the reader in the research process as well. “The reader understands that the author has written the narrative but suspends knowledge of authorial discourse” (Coutler, 2009, p. 609). The suspension of the author as being a part of the discussion allows the reader to look at the narrative in a different way.

**Interviews as Poetry**

As stated earlier in my dissertation one of my goals of my study is to see if there is a perceived connection between self-affirmation impacted by culturally specific events/activities and self-determination. In order to do so I chose to present the narratives of the participants with an alternative method, poetry. I chose this alternative method as to allow the reader to have multiple interpretations of the participants' collegiate experience and recognize the constructivism of re-presenting another's experience.

With this dissertation, one of my goals was to allow readers to have multiple interpretations of the participants' collegiate experiences. Multiple interpretations are important to my study as it brings the reader into the interview. It gives the reader the ability to place themselves into the interview room, be critical of themselves and the narratives being shared and to be as close as possible to experience what I, the researcher, experienced as the participants shared their stories.

Poetry as a means to present interviews allows for recognition of my construction of the participants story and also highlights that I was re-telling their story. While I do use direct quotes throughout the findings and interpretations chapter, I chose not to use the traditional method of portraying interviews. Poetry gives the reader the ability to recognize the researcher's role in the re-construction of another's thoughts, feelings, emotions, and story. Stressing this reconstruction is important as I have identified it very difficult to tackle someone's collegiate experience during a 60-90 minute interview. Most importantly poetry allows the reader to recognize the narrative being presented is my interpretation of the narrative told to me (Richardson, 1997). My interpretation of the participants' narrative is embedded even in how I have chosen to construct the poem.

In addition to poetry giving recognition of the construction of the thoughts of the participant by the researcher, it also gives construction of meaning by way of various literary devices. These devices: spacing, line breakage, repetition, etc., gives a closer rendition of the normal speech used during the actual interview (Richardson, 1997). The similarities between poetry and normal or regular speech permits the participant to speak to the reader. The reader gains entry into visualizing the experiences, situations, thoughts, and emotions of the participant/interviewee.

When constructing the poems for my dissertation, I used Laurel Richardson's poem about Louisa May's life as a guiding model (Richardson, 1997). The lines in each stanza of my poems appear in order as stated during the interview and are not re-arranged. Within each stanza the lines are direct quotes from the participants surrounding the topic being discussed. Roman numerals identify each snap-shot of the participants thought, experience, or mini-story. This is done for easy readability of the poem and to keep the thoughts, experiences, or mini-stories as close to the context in which they were told during the interview. These stanzas, divided by the roman numerals, are from various parts of the interview and not necessarily in the order which they were told.

There are a range of literary devices used in poetry and some are reflected in in the structure of my poems. I show these literary devices visually in my poem through its physical construction or how the poem is typed. Line breaks show repetition, ellipses to exhibit pauses in speech, italics to show change in tone, bold typing is used when a particular word or phrase is stressed, and parenthesis illustrate when the participant was either addressing me directly during the interview or their physical expression.

## Data Collection

### Site Selection

For my dissertation I chose two public institutions as my research cites: Midwest University and Justice University. In order to keep the identity of the institutions confidential pseudonyms were assigned to each.

**Midwest University.** The studies in the higher education literature concerning African American students mainly took place at mid-to-large sized PWIs that were "research one" or "research focused" institutions.[1] The institutions (PWIs and HBCUs alike) where higher education research has been conducted were typically located in the Midwest with some in the Northeastern, Mid-Atlantic regions, and California. I decided to be consistent with the demographic locations where previous institutions were studied in regards to the location of the PWI. I chose to study Midwest University as a site for my dissertation for the following reasons:

1. Student characteristics: Active African American student population with examples of race specific events/activities.
2. University characteristics: Large, research one institution that mimics the types of universities researched in higher education literature.

**Justice University.** The studies in the higher education literature which focused on HBCUs were minimal and mainly literature reviews. For my dissertation I chose to conduct an actual study at an HBCU and not provide another literature review. I moved away from providing a literature review as I felt in order to achieve the goal of getting at the student voice, I needed to conduct a study with interviews. Also, in the higher

[1] Research one and research focused are categories of educational institutions according to the Carnegie classification.

education literature, some of the HBCUs were public and some private, but all were four-year institutions. I kept with this theme in the literature and chose an HBCU that is a public four- year institution.

The HBCU I chose for my study was Justice University. I chose this institution for two reasons as well:

1. University characteristics: Comparable in size and research focus to Midwest University.
2. New to research literature: Located in the Southern part of the United States and is an understudied institution

The main contribution my study gives to the higher education literature is I compare and contrast the experiences of African American students at a PWI and HBCU, which is a newer addition to higher education research.

**Participant Selection**

My dissertation focuses on African American students only, as the education literature constantly refers to these students as being "at risk" in terms of their education. Their voice is absent in the discussion concerning their experiences, how they define success, and how they attempt to achieve it.

For this particular study, I was interested in learning how African American students self-affirm at their respective institutions and how they perceive this self-affirmation to relate or not to their collegiate success. In order to achieve this process of portraying their narratives surrounding their collegiate experience to understand how they perceive self-affirmation, the students needed to have a narrative to share. Interviewing participants with a senior class status and having been enrolled at their institution for

three or more years allowed me to have a better understanding of the collegiate experience of these students and to see if they perceive self-affirmation to be a facilitator or inhibitor to their success at their institution. Participants with other class statuses would not have had enough experiences at their institutions to contribute a complete narrative and reflection on their collegiate experiences. In addition, participants that have not been enrolled at the institution for three or more years would not have enough knowledge of the institution nor an in-depth perception of what it takes to be successful there.

Lastly, the participants needed to participate in some type of extra-curricular activity to note what these students are doing at their respective institutions to see what acts of self-affirmation they are participating or practicing. If the participants do not interact with others at their institution in any capacity, it makes it difficult to see if and how they perceive their self-affirmation to have an impact or connection to success.

I obtained participants for the study through marketing with a flyer and email communication to students, faculty, and staff, student organizations/clubs, etc. Participants at Midwest University were obtained through flyers, mass emails, and faculty and staff announcements distributed through the institution's minority affairs office, African American Studies department, and African American Cultural Center, and any student organization with an identifier of being related to or focused on African Americans.

Participants at Justice University were obtained in a similar manner as with Midwest University. Flyers, mass emails, and faculty and staff announcements were distributed to any student organization with an identifier of being related or focused on

African Americans, as well as, a cultural center and African American Studies Department.

I interviewed 6 African American students, 3 from each institution. The participants were treated with anonymity, had pseudonyms assigned and were pre-qualified to participate in the study. The pre-qualification criteria were as follows:

1. Self-identify as African American
2. Currently enrolled at their institution for the 2011/2012 academic school year
3. Currently hold senior class status for 2011/2012 academic school year
4. Been enrolled at their institution for three or more years
5. Is involved in extra-curricular activities

**Data Collection Timeline**

The timeline for the study was as follows:

- August 29, 2011: Recruitment materials distributed to both Midwest and Justice universities
- September 9, 2011: Informed consent, preliminary questionnaire distributed, and initial interviews conducted at Justice University
- September 9-16, 2011: Transcription of first initial interviews at Justice University completed by third party
- October 14, 2011: Informed consent, preliminary questionnaire distributed, and initial interviews conducted at Midwest University (First site visit)
- October 14-21, 2011: Transcription of first initial interviews at Midwest University completed by third party

- November 9, 2011: Informed consent, preliminary questionnaire distributed, and initial interviews conducted at Midwest University (Second site visit)
- November 11, 2011: Transcription of all initial interviews completed by third party and then emailed by myself to participants for feedback
- November 25, 2011: Feedback due from all participants
- November 30, 2011: All coding completed for all interviews

Recruitment for participants for the study began the second week of the Fall 2011 semester at each institution, August 29, 2011. Participation in the study was conducted in three phases. Phase one consisted of written informed consent and completion of the preliminary questionnaire to qualify participants. Following the preliminary questionnaire, I used their responses to determine whether or not they met the criteria for the study. Once I determined the criteria were met each student was notified of their offer to participate and at that point entered into phase two: one on one interviews. These interviews were scheduled immediately following notification of qualifying for the study. There were multiple interviews conducted in 24 hours. The interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes.

Transcription of the interview was completed shortly after the initial interview was completed by a hired outside company. Upon receiving a transcription of their interview, the participants entered the third and final phase of participation in the study. In phase three each participant is asked to provide feedback and possibly have a follow-up interview conducted. Each participant received a list of questions along with the transcript:

1. Does this reflect what you are trying to say?
2. Do you have anything else to add?

Upon receiving feedback from the participant, it was then determined if a follow-up interview was needed. For example, if the participant's feedback suggested something was left out of their interview, further explanation was needed, or different interpretations of the narrative were occurring between participant and researcher, a second interview was conducted. Follow-up interviews were not conducted as they were not needed after receiving participant feedback. All the participants received a transcript of their interview to provide feedback and two participants made corrections.

**Methods of Analysis**

I began analyzing the data with grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) by looking for themes within each institution as a data set and then across institutions. I began the analysis starting with the coding of the initial one on one interviews from Justice University. As Corbin and Strauss stressed the coding process is breaking down the data, conceptualizing it, and restructuring it back in new ways (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The coding process consisting of 3 stages (open, axial, and selective) was a process which constantly forced me to reference the data and constantly move back and forth between data collection and the coding process. I decided to begin the coding process after all initial interviews were conducted at Justice University due to limited time I had available at each institution.

Beginning with the very first two initial interviews at Justice University, I coded them openly to start. The process of open coding consisted of me constantly asking various questions about the data set, comparing/contrasting the answers to those

questions in order to label incidents with concepts, and then be able to formulate concepts into groups or categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). I conducted open coding by reading each transcript carefully and referencing my field notes during the interview and writing down topics of themes that emerged. I did this process with one interview at a time.

As I continuously added an interview from Justice University to the open coding process until completed, I continued the open coding process with the data from Midwest University until all interviews had been successfully openly coded. I then began to tighten the categories and moved into the next phase of coding: axial coding. I performed axial coding according to the paradigm model as presented by Corbin & Strauss (1990). The paradigm model consisted of linking the subcategories of a category together and was done by looking at the causal conditions as linked to the phenomenon, context, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies, and consequences (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). I conducted axial coding by categorizing and sub-categorizing themes across interviews from each institution individually and then across both.

The last and final part of the coding process, selective coding, took place immediately following the completion of axial coding. Selective coding is the “process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development” (Corbin & Strauss, 2002, p. 116). I went through the steps of identifying the story line, relating the subsidiary categories around the core category, relating the categories at dimensional level, validating the relationships against the data, and filling in the categories that need further refinement. I used the paradigm model again in the second phase of the relating the subsidiary categories to the core category (Corbin & Strauss,

2002). In this phase of coding I looked across categories and looked for ways they related to better identify the story line that was present.

I utilized the following chart when analyzing the data.

| Theme | Category | Sub-Category | Reflecting Quotes |
|---|---|---|---|

When I began the analysis of the data, I used the procedure of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). First I completed the analysis utilizing grounded theory only. Next, I used the tenets of CRT as categories which to re-analyze the data produced from grounded theory. I used grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to look beyond the race-based ideas/tenets of CRT to be able to see if there were other accounts as to the connections between self-affirmation, self-determination, and success for African American students. In using CRT I wanted to look at the data from a race-centered perspective, a perspective of what counts as knowledge/success for these African American students as a community of color at their respective institutions. Asset based language is integrated throughout the entire analysis as I wanted to move away from the all-too familiar discussions of African Americans from a deficit perspective and move into a positivist space, by allowing the naming of their own reality (Parker & Stovall, 2004).

Of the 6 tenets of CRT I focused on 3 of them to guide the re-coding process upon the completion of that process with grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). I used the CRT tenets (experiential knowledge, challenge to dominant ideologies and centrality of race and racism) to re-code the data with these as categories (Bernal, 2002).

I set aside the CRT lens in order to compare and infuse that analysis of the data to the theory which was produced by grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In the

findings and conclusion sections I return to this and explicate more how the two frameworks brought about the birthing of a new theory.

After coding was completed utilizing grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) I took the chart I constructed and then analyzed the data with the 3 tenets of CRT previously mentioned. I re-coded the data based on the 3 tenets of: experiential knowledge, challenge to dominant ideologies, and centrality of race and racism as the categories (Bernal, 2002). I utilized a separate chart from the grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) coding process which to analyze the data:

| Experiential Knowledge | Challenge to Ideologies | Centrality of Race/Racism | Reflecting Quotes |
|---|---|---|---|

In looking at the categories for coding CRT I further explain the definitions of the categories in the coding process. I built on the definitions of the tenets of CRT mentioned in the opening of this chapter by Dixson and Rosseau (2005) and provide my definition of how I looked at each category when going through the coding process. I defined experiential knowledge as taking the lessons and life experiences of those marginalized and placing their experiences in a context which is empowering and inspirational. Challenge to ideologies is defined as challenges to the school structure and societal structure which the students operated daily; their challenges toward colorblindness, neutrality, etc. Lastly, centrality of race/racism I defined as race being the underlying cause as to why there are some who are greatly advantaged and those that are disadvantaged on their campus and in society as whole.

By breaking the data down into categories or parts, this allowed me to see the similarities and differences among the African American students at the PWIs and HBCUs. I took a larger amount of data and broke it into pieces in order to take a closer look at the process of self-affirmation, self-determination, and definition of success and how it is achieved (Gough & Scott, 2000). As stated in *Exploring the Purposes of Qualitative Data Coding in Educational Inquiry: Insights from Recent Research*, predetermining categories for the data in advance can become somewhat complex if the interview questions are open-ended. As I used open-ended interview questions in my study, I chose to allow the categories to emerge after the data was collected rather than attempt to pigeonhole the data into already constructed categories (Gough & Scott, 2000). I looked for evidence to confirm self-affirmation as a form of self-determination for African American students in higher education and also for evidence that disconfirms this as well.

In developing my final theory for my study, I used grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and CRT (Ceja et al., 2000) by comparing the categories that submerged from the grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) coding process, coded those categories according to CRT (Ceja et al., 2000), and drew an analysis as to what CRT says about the categories in order to fill in the gaps from grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and vice versa.

**Grounded Critical Race Theory**

After completing the coding for the analysis with both grounded theory and CRT I found it necessary to analyze what each theory contributed to the study and what each lacked by breaking down the theories in parts. I begin with grounded theory and critical theory.

Grounded theory and critical theory have been combined in the past by scholars, producing grounded critical theory. Grounded critical theory uses grounded theory to allow the experiences of those being observed to speak for themselves, not giving voice, but recognition of the voice which already exists. Critical Theory is a methodology that looks for explanation of the connections between the past and present to note what needs to be done to break historical cycles (Kushner & Morrow, 2003). Therefore Critical Theory looks to focus on constructions of power and domination to understand the social structures in place (Hayes et al., 2011). When both theories are combined together, grounded critical theory "is intended to result in the generation of knowledge that contributes to meaningful understandings and explanations of human interaction in the social world, these in turn potentially contributing to emancipatory transformation" (Kushner & Morrow, 2003, p. 37). However, the social and cultural reproduction discussed by Kushner and Morrow (2003) as being a part of Critical Theory, does not fully uncover the establishment of race in every day structures nor does it take into consideration the power of race and racism in society. The Critical Theory often masks the race component, as scholars use it to understand society and culture, but do not bring more depth to the theory past that, excluding the powerful institutions in society built around race. This lack of exhibiting the centrality of race in society and everyday

structures in grounded critical theory lead to the development of a new theory I have termed as grounded critical race theory.

In looking at the analysis of my data, I quickly realized there were benefits of both CRT and grounded theory which were imperative to leading to the major discoveries in my study. CRT allowed me to look at the experiences of the participants from a positive perspective. Using the tenant experiential knowledge gave me the means to move away from the deficit perspective which African American students are normally discussed. While grounded theory was able to bring forth commonalities amongst the participants, the theory alone does not provide a positivist perspective when discussing the participants' experiences. Grounded theory "may allow—but does not compel—researchers to extend their consideration of structural influences on social processes" (Kushner & Morrow, 2003, p.37). Bringing race into the centrality of discussion combined with their experiential knowledge, gives the reader another viewpoint to look at these participants and therefore African American students by viewing race as a structural power.

On the other hand, CRT having set tenants of which to analyze data was also restricting to the study because it only allowed the data to be viewed in one manner. CRT focused on themes of challenges and identity. I was able to see some sub-categories of finances, family, persistence, and having a realistic view, however; CRT did not allow for these sub-categories to be as salient in the data as grounded theory did. Some categories and sub-categories could have been easily looked over by using CRT alone. I would like to point out both theories submerged the categories of challenges and identity.

As explained earlier in the chapter, focusing on student voice was a goal with my dissertation. Using interviews, narrative inquiry and grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) let the participant voice come through. When the methodology is combined with CRT (Ceja et al., 2000) I stress the importance of race to the study, producing grounded critical race theory. In addition, to show the re-construction of the participants' story, I explained my usage of poetry to represent direct quotes. In the following chapter I explain the analysis of my data.