Summer 2016

The Makings of an Activist: Navigating through an Oppressive System and Understanding the Characteristics of African American Male Activist

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The Makings of an Activist: Navigating through an Oppressive System and Understanding the Characteristics of African American Male Activist

A Graduate Thesis Proposal

Presented to the Faculty
Division of Psychology and Counseling
Governors State University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Psychology

By
Tenille Wallace

August 01, 2016

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Abstract

The U.S. minimizes struggles that African Americans have endured since enslavement. Oppression has robbed many minorities from developing their full potential as humans both psychologically and socially (Freire, 2000). Many African American men grapple with their identity, because their identity is formed by the dominant culture’s narrative, developed by European Americans (Watts, Williams, & Jager, 2003). Thus, the identity of African Americans may not be fully integrate into the dominant narrative which describes the lived experiences envision by African Americans. European Americans, specifically white researchers, maintain the status quo by neglecting African American experiences in academic literature (Phinney, 1990). In order to develop a counter-narrative, researchers need to understand the attitudes and experiences of African Americans.

The present thesis aimed to explore how African American male activists construct their identity through an inductive, qualitative framework. Specifically, the research was designed to address the following research questions (1) How do African American male activists construct their identity? (2) How do African American men activist engage in the community? and (3) How has recent media coverage on the killing of African American men impacted the identity of African American men?

Semi-structured interviews allowed all consenting participants to elaborate on their day-to-day experiences. Seven African American male activists were interviewed. Participation was limited to activists living in Illinois. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using Dedoose 4.5.95 web application. Two primary themes emerged from the data analysis. The first theme included characteristic of an activists and the behaviors they engage in. Participants discussed five characteristics they believe they must embodied in order to carry out
responsibilities as activists: (1) Building Trusting Relationships (2) Communication Skills (3) Understand the Laws (4) Emotions and (5) Ideology. Each characteristic provide a different definition that described features of an activists. The second theme encompassed past and present forms of oppression experienced by the activists and their communities. Participants described experiences they believe contributed to past and present forms of oppression. The findings from this research provide examples of day-to-day experiences of African American males that can enhance future projects that focus on African American men.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Historically, African Americans were taught to believe they were inadequate, abnormal, and lacked humanistic qualities. African Americans and their children were abused, humiliated and devalued (Carson, 2013). During the Jim Crow era, African Americans were prohibited from attending all European American institutions, restaurants, communities, and the right to vote (Carson, 2013). The war on African American men emerged in the mainstream consciousness with the killing of Emmett Till who was viciously beaten, shot, barbed wired, and left for dead in the Tallahatchie River by two European Americans. The history of African American males is rooted in America’s history of slavery, and segregation was, and continues to be, one of the primary ways white Americans have been able to perpetuate the cycle of oppression.

Before delving into past literature to provide context for the present thesis, it is important to note that race and ethnicity are terms professionals often use incorrectly (Cokley, 2005; Smith, 1991; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998; & Phinney, Horencyzk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001. Race and ethnicity are often assumed synonymous. However, race and ethnicity differ in several ways. For instance, traditionally, race was defined as a physical characteristic that identifies the racial category. However, research suggests that race has more to do with one’s regional location and ancestry as opposed to physical characteristics (Wang & Sue, 2005; & National Human Genome Research Institute, 2005). Ethnicity, on the other hand, is a culturally derived concept that group members together based upon their shared ancestry. Ethnic identity is an achieved sense of awareness that encompasses exploring the group, in which one identifies with, plus shared emotional attachments and commitment to experiences (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). Of particular importance, ethnic identifiers and racial identifiers are used interchangeably in the literature (Cokley, 2005). For example, Dana (2002) utilizes the terms
cultural/racial perspective and cultural/racial identity to highlight the importance of increasing cultural competency in the U.S. However, some researchers argue the term Black should be removed from empirical studies (Agyemang, Bhopal, & Bruijnzeels, 2005).

My aim is to use culturally sensitive language that include males who self-identify as an African American, Black, or both. I do not propose a one-dimensional use of the term African American; rather it implies a shared cultural knowledge of their collective identities (Tillman, 2002). Thus, it is imperative that I use the terms African American and Black interchangeably because participants may be confused as to which term best apply to their experiences (Cokley, 2005). Since the present thesis employs a qualitative design, it is in the best interest of this study as well as the participants that I keep an open-mind about their lived experiences and how they perceive themselves. For example, some participants may not know the difference between racial/ethnic identifiers. To this end, utilizing the terms African American and Black interchangeably will decrease the chances of violating participants' beliefs about self while encouraging participants to participate in data collection.

Also, it should be noted that I intentionally used a lower case “w“ with the term white and capitalized the term Black throughout the present thesis. Since the dominant group controls mainstream coconscious, I do not believe white history can compare to the turmoil Blacks have endured while living in the U.S. Blacks have not had the opportunity to explore their historical roots outside of the U.S., partly because most of them cannot connect to their African lineage like European Americans (Dyson, 2011). Thus, I see no reason to capitalize the term white since Black Americans are not afforded the same opportunity as white Americans. Furthermore, capitalizing the term Black is appropriate because it refers to the people of African diaspora whereas the lowercase “b“ implies a color (Tharps, 2014).
The historical context of Black Americans and white Americans has not always been positive. When Black Americans experience racial segregation, they tend to have animosity and mistrust toward the opposite race, specifically white Americans (Olzak & Shanahan, 1996). As a result, of the tension between races, there have been many race riots in the U.S., the most notable in the state of Illinois is the “Chicago Race Riot of 1919” (Johnson, 1922). George Stauber, a white American, killed a Black American teenager named Eugene Williams while swimming in the Twenty-Ninth Street beach. Stauber threw stones at Williams as onlookers and police officers watched the incident occur without intervening. Allegedly, the impact from the stone caused Williams to drown. However, the court deemed Williams death to be a result of swimming underwater while trying to protect himself from being stoned, essentially causing his own death (Johnson, 1922). As a result of Williams’s death, Black and white gang members were involved in a seven-day race riot that resulted to 23 killings and over 500 people injured.

Today, African American men are still explicitly and implicitly told they are worthless and not equal to their European American counterparts. Evidence of this can be seen in the criminal justice system where African American men are six times more likely to be arrested than European American males (NAACP, 2015). African American men face discrimination and oppression from multiple life domains in U.S. society. This is particularly true in the city of Chicago where citizens have been at war for over 40 years (Edwards & Steele, 2011). For example, over 1,000 victims have been shot in the city of Chicago from January-June 2015 (Chicago Tribune, 2015). Males are more likely to be killed in the city of Chicago than females. In 2011, males accounted for 90.1% of deaths and 75.3% of the deaths were African American (Chicago Police Department, 2011).
While there were leaders like Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, more recent leaders both men and women and their allies have lead organizations like Black Lives Matter and Black Girl Dangerous who are heavily involved in the African American community. While both organizations fight against racism, they are also active in addressing other minority related issues such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community and poverty. Organizations such as these have served as the voice for many African Americans. An activist is a person who seeks sociopolitical change within his respected community (Walker, 2008). Activism has been a primary technique that marginalized groups utilize in effort to voice their concerns with people in power. Activists question those in power to modify laws and practices to create a more just society. For example, activism in the African American community can be seen in the 2014 “Michael Brown Law.” In 2014, Michael Brown an unarmed teenager was killed by Officer Darren Williams, a European American police officer. During this time, many African American communities petitioned the court to pass a law that requires police officers to wear body cameras in order to document their interactions with citizens. As a result, in Rialto, California, the entire police department wears body cameras. One-body cameras were in use, the use of force decreased by 60% and the citizen complaints decreased by 88%. For the present study, individuals must self-identify as activists. While they do not have to engage directly in activism through their profession, potential participants may be engage in various forms of activism such as protests, community organizing, and/or local politics.

In the subsequent chapters, I will describe information about my research topic that expands on discrimination and oppression specific to the African American community followed by a discussion of identity formation and masculinity in relation to African American men.
The literature review is followed by the method section where I describe how activists were interviewed to develop a counter-narrative that elaborates on their lived experiences, which are rarely explored through empirical research. The activists participated in various activities that involve socio-political change. Utilizing a qualitative approach provided African American men with an opportunity to discuss their lived experiences (Patton, 2014). Their lived experiences was explored through a semi-structured interview guide which allowed for discussion through predetermined questions, rooted in past research, while also allowing for new information to emerge (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). The information that emerged from the data identified new concepts that can be used to generate a new model of identity (Patton, 2014; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews provided me with an opportunity to probe participants to elaborate on their lived experiences to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Smith, 1995). Through semi-structured interviews, I was able to explore the following research questions (1) How do African American male activists construct their identity? (2) How do African American men activist engage in the community? and (3) How has recent media coverage on the killing of African American men impacted the identity of African American men?

Last, thematic analysis allowed me to examine the data from the semi-structured interviews. Utilizing a thematic analysis provided me with an opportunity to examine the social processes that facilitate participants' reality, meaning, and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I analyzed the social processes by familiarizing myself with the data, created a codebook to group clusters of information, identified themes, reread themes, defined and named the themes, and reported my research results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, through thematic analysis of seven interviews I was able to identified two principle themes that highlighted the
experiences participants shared. The first theme included characteristics of activists and the behaviors they engaged in. In order for activists to carry out their responsibilities as an activists they believed they needed to embodied the following five characteristics: (1) Building Trusting Relationships (2) Communication Skills (3) Understand the Laws (4) Emotions and (5) Ideology.

The second theme explored past and present forms of oppression experienced by the activists and their communities that included, but not limited to, Jim Crow.

Distinct Contributions

The present study distinctively contributed to the scientific community by investigating an unexplored topic about African American male activists. A key strength of the qualitative design is the rich narratives it provided from all seven participants. The stories activists shared allowed them to elaborate on their experiences while providing a counter-narrative. In most cases, the dominant narrative is a part of the mainstream consciousness, and as a result, marginalized groups narratives adhere to the dominant culture’s narrative as opposed to their own. The findings from this research will provide professionals with information that better serves the African American community.

Research Question

The present thesis distinctively contributes to the scientific community by investigating an unexplored topic through the following research questions:

Research Question

1. How do African American male activists construct their identity?

2. How do African American men activist engage in the community?

3. How has recent media coverage on the killing of African American men impacted the identity of African American men?
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The present thesis focuses on the experiences of African American activists. I explore their identity in relation to prejudice and experiences of discrimination and oppression. Prejudice, discrimination and oppression are related terms, but each has a unique definition. Prejudice is an attitude based on stereotypical beliefs about a given group (Allport, 1954). For example, a person may believe in the stereotype that African Americans are lazy which is shaped into an attitude or prejudicial belief toward African Americans. Prejudices can then be acted upon which becomes discrimination (Allport, 1954). Groups that experience discrimination at multiple levels in society can then be oppressed (Freire, 2000); oppression is a process whereby individuals are controlled in order to maintain social inequality (Watts, Griffin & Abdul-Adil, 1994). Thus, prejudice refers to attitudes, discrimination refers to behaviors, and oppression relates to a sociopolitical state.

The term race came into the public consciousness in the U.S. in the 1700s as a reference to racial categories (e.g., white, Native American, and Black). It signified human differences for the purpose of structuring society and remains a critical component of the way in which U.S. society is structured today (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Race is often defined as a mixture of biological characteristics and social constructions. According to Chávez and Guido-DiBrito (1999), race is one’s physical features, genes, and characteristics. However, research has consistently shown that the definition of race is much more complex. Genetics are not meaningfully related to race (Wang & Sue, 2005; & National Human Genome Research Institute, 2005). For example, individuals sharing the same geographical region and ancestral history are more likely to share similar genetic make-up than those from the same racial category (Wang & Sue, 2005; & National Human Genome Research Institute, 2005). Social
constructionists assert that race has no biological basis but rather it functions as a way to define people’s experiences and opportunities within the social world (Goodman, 2000).

Stereotypes and Prejudice

Common stereotypes that followed generations of African American males include “Sambo”, “Jim Crow”, and “Savage” (Green, 1999). Sambo is an illiterate African American male that acts like an overgrown child who seeks to make his slave master happy. While Sambo was the Southern version of the African American male, Northern counterparts created their version of the African American male, which is called Jim Crow. Jim Crow was a version of an old crippled African American man who wore rags and entertained people by dancing in the streets. Another character white Americans created to undermine the African American male was the term Savage. Savage was a term European Americans used to describe African American males with brute physical characteristics and super natural human strength. The term Savage was also used to justify the need for lynching in order to reduce feelings of guilt that rise within the mainstream conscious (Green, 1999). All pervasive stereotypes of African American men emphasize low intellect with child-like qualities with little to no meaningful purpose.

Negative racial stereotypes, cognitive distortions that inform and develop emotions, judgements, and behavior (Cox, Abramson, Devine, Hollon, 2012), continue to plague the Black community in multiple life domains (Wright, 2009). Within the educational system, Black students who achieve high academic success are called names that insinuate they are either “acting white” or are an “oreo” (Spencer, Noll, Stolzfus, Harpalani, 2001; Baber, 2012). An oreo is a phenotypically Black individual who acts according to stereotypically white norms. The Black individual’s race represents the external part of the cookie and the crème filling represents white culture. Adherence to such stereotypes can lead to identity conflict within the Black
community. For example, Black students whose identity stems from the acting white concept are more likely to have low academic performance and are highly associated with Eurocentricity personalities (i.e., attitudes and behaviors stereotypically aligned with white culture; Spencer, Noll, Stolzfus, Harpalani, 2001). Such prejudicial beliefs are rooted in beliefs that Black students are not capable of high academic success. Research has shown that Black male students with high academic performance have a strong sense of self-esteem and Afrocentrality than those who develop the “acting white” personality (Spencer, Noll, Stolzfus, Harpalani, 2001). Thus, Black students who reject the stereotype of being an oreo and believe in their ability to succeed academically perform better in academic settings.

Discrimination

Discrimination is typically an intergroup phenomenon; it occurs between members of two different groups (Inman & Baron, 1996). Discrimination is any behavior that results in differential treatment based upon a category in which the individual is affiliated, which results in negative consequences across life domains (White-Hood, 1998). African Americans are consistently discriminated against on the basis of their race. Discrimination occurs in the presence of status-asymmetry where victims are expected to be members of lower status groups relative to the victimizer (Rodin, Price, Bryson & Sanchez, 1990).

Racial discrimination occurs at different levels for African Americans students where they experience limited to no access to resources (Sanders-Phillips et al., 2014). For example, African American students attending predominately European American universities experience discrimination not only from their peers but by faculty members as well (Beaman, 2014). More specifically, African American male athletes are not treated like scholars within the classroom and are often discouraged to think critically in predominately European American institutions
AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

(Beaman, 2014) thereby inhibiting their academic growth. The notion that African American men are expected to be incompetent, subordinate, and passive within an institutional setting is one way in which oppression manifests.

Racial profiling is a form of discrimination African Americans experience in U.S. society. Racial profiling is not based on individual behavior, but it is any act initiated on the basis of race, ethnicity and racial origin (Bates, 2010). Thus, racial profiling is particularly salient for visible minorities, including African Americans. For example, African Americans, in a predominantly European American neighborhood, were more likely to be pulled over, ticketed, and arrested by police officers than European American drivers during routine traffic stops (Bates, 2010; Lundman & Kaufman, 2003; Keesee, 2008; Thompson, 2001; & Harris, 1997). By utilizing racial profiling, police officers are acting on suspicions rooted in stereotypes rather than evidence (Barlow & Barlow, 2002). Police officers who utilize racial profiling embrace the idea that racial minorities are more likely criminals than their white counterparts (Barlow & Barlow, 2002). However, racial profiling is not limited to policing behaviors. African Americans report experiences of racial profiling in various public settings (Brewster, Lynn, & Cocroft, 2014).

Decisions based on race alone, on the part of the dominant group, is a function of the dominant group asserting its power. In a study examining African American protests from 1960 to 1990, police officers were more likely to police and take action in African American protests than European American protests (Davenport, Soule, & Armstrong, 2011). For example, in 1977, police officers were present at about 75% of African American protests while only being present at 25% of European American protests. Little variation has been found in police presence from 1960 to 1990 when controlling for behavioral threat (e.g., property damage, violence). Event size, which may symbolize unity and community support, is one of the most common
reasons police officers are present at protests and utilize violence (Ratliff, 2001; Warner & McCarthy, 2013). Thus, large numbers of African Americans and their allies is viewed to be a threat, because they are threatening the dominant group’s power and questioning the foundation on which U.S. society is built.

When police are present at African American protests, they are more likely to make arrests, use violence, and use violence with arrests (Davenport, Soule, & Armstrong, 2011). According to Martin Luther King, Jr., a riot is the language of the unheard, which stresses that African Americans remain an oppressed silenced minority and they protest as a way to get their voices heard (Rotham, 2015). However, when African Americans exercise their right to protest and raise their voices, they are viewed as threatening. More so, African Americans recognize the need and demand for equality within all systems of society.

The fight for justice and equality has been a continuous battle for the African American community. For example, in the 1960s civil rights movement, protesters were beaten and arrested because they raised their voice against the dominant narrative (Auster & Levin, 1965). Even today, the dominant narrative continues to control the attitudes and beliefs of marginalized groups. When protestors address discriminatory actions on the part of government and political officials, police officers are more likely to utilize violence in order to maintain power and social control (Ratliff, 2011). Furthermore, protestors’ that utilize diverse tactical methods (e.g., sit-ins, boycotts, and marches) are more likely to be beaten, arrested and jailed by local police officers (Warner & McCarthy, 2013). Thus, the use of violence is deemed socially acceptable when protecting the power of the dominant group.

In many cases, police officers abuse their privileges. Lawfully, police officers have the right to use physical force to apprehend citizens (Illinois Complied Statutes, n.d.). However,
police officers do not have the right to use unnecessary or excessive force (Illinois Compiled Statutes, n.d.). Unnecessary force is when police officers do not have logical reasons to use force. For example, in June 2015, Eric Casebolt, a police officer slammed 14 year old Dajerria Becton to the ground, placed his knees on her back, pressed her face in the grass, and waved his gun in the faces of nearby friends. The use of force was clearly unnecessary, as Becton was not posing a threat to either the police officer or the community (CNN, 2015).

Excessive force is when police officers utilize severe techniques to subdue citizens in situations where excessive force is not normally the standard protocol. For example, in April 2015, Walter Scott, a Black man, was shot in the back multiple times by Officer Michael Slager when he attempted to flee the scene of the crime. Although Scott fled the scene twice, once when Slager pulled him over and again when Slager tried to handcuff him (The Guardian, 2015), it still does not give Slager the right to shoot and kill Scott. Officer Slager was caught on video shooting Scott while running away from the scene. The video also shows that Scott was not a threat to Slager at the time of the shooting. However, the use of excessive force is up to police officers discretion and court officials’ are the only ones who determine if police officers’ conduct was reasonable during the time of the offense.

Many African American males have lost their lives due to discrimination on behalf of police officers, and political leaders and policy makers should consider the perils of excessive force and unnecessary force within the police department. Police brutality is wrong and unjust. Thus, a plausible concern becomes how are Black males being killed at the hands of police officers at astronomical rates and nothing is being done to change the policing culture. The killings of Black males at the hands of police officers are often overlooked and should be examine in order to restore the community faith in the judicial system.
Oppression

Oppression is the asymmetrical power between two or more groups where one group is granted resources that are withheld from other groups (Riger, 1993). Discrimination is a method that oppressors use to maintain their resources. The oppressors are those who utilize power to manipulate marginalized groups, which provides them the ability to influence and in some instances control the life of others within a community (Freire, 2000). Furthermore, oppressors maintain their power by passing it from one generation to the next, which allows them to sustain and protect their privilege. For instance, oppressors have a better chance of negotiating and navigating through life situations. Therefore, when compared to oppressed groups, oppressors have an advantage over employment, education, health, and finances (Freire, 2000). As a result, oppressors have access to a better quality of life.

One tactic that oppressors use to justify their wrongdoings is to dehumanize those who are oppressed (Freire, 2000). Power is utilized to perpetuate injustice while appearing to serve the needs and concerns of an oppressive group. For example, many African Americans are stuck within a cycle of poverty where resources such as schools are made accessible, but the school system only perpetuates their marginalized status. More specifically, schools within African American communities have far less resources than schools in European American neighborhoods (Shapiro, Meschede & Osoro, 2013), so the educational system does not equalize opportunities among races.

Given the lack of person-environment fit between African Americans and the educational system, African American students have poor academic performance and are at-risk for dropping out of school (Shapiro, Meschede & Osoro, 2013; Witherspoon, 2011). Sixty-nine percent of African American students dropout of school because the school’s environment is not conducive
for academic attainment (e.g., high percentage of dropouts) (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). When ignored, poor academic performance in middle school leads to poor academic performance in high school (Lagenkamp, 2010). Notably, the lack of fit between African Americans and the educational system may be pronounced for African American males.

African American males are more likely to be disengaged in school-related tasks than their female counterparts, and their interest in academic work is more likely to decrease upon entry into high school (Corkley, McClain, Jones, & Johnson, 2011). Individuals, like African Americans, who leave the educational system with little to no education, skills, or resources, are more likely to live beneath the poverty threshold (Kaniuka, 2010; & Chaney, 2014). Thus, the U.S. educational system perpetuates institutionalized racism.

Another form of oppression widely seen throughout the U.S. is the prison system. African American men make up 1 million of the 2.3 million prisoner population (Criminal Justice Fact Sheet, 2015). In prison, African American men are treated like property instead of human beings. They are stored in a warehouse-like setting where they are surrounded by staff and other incarcerated men who consistently violate their human rights. Plus many African American men return to society worse off than when they left for prison (Jacobs, 2015). No effective rehabilitation takes place. U.S. society has capitalized from institutionalized oppression.

Private correctional firms and their stockholders (e.g., Citigroup, J.P. Morgan Chase, and Wells Fargo) are financially invested in sustaining the African American inmate population because housing them is profitable (Welch & Turner, 2007). These private businesses supply food, bedding, healthcare, medication, counseling services, and jobs not only to the inmates, but for the local communities as well (Welch & Turner, 2007). This type of predatory behavior leads to a prison industrial complex, which means that inmates are more likely to return to prison
because their basic needs are met, and they are more likely to commit another crime in order to avoid the demands of society (e.g. paying for a mortgage, transportation, or food; Smith & Hattery, 2010).

Research has consistently found that some African Americans hold on to early experiences of discrimination and are less likely to forgive those who discriminate. For example, in one study, African Americans found it difficult to discuss discriminatory experiences with family and friends because their experiences of discrimination were sensitive and highly associated with pain (Henson, Derlega, & Pearson, 2013). Inhibiting emotions prevent African Americans from expressing their feeling and thoughts about discrimination, which ultimately hinders African Americans from understanding the impact of discrimination and the implications it has on their lives.

Internalized oppression is where the oppressed group views itself as oppressors view them (Freire, 2000). Thus, the oppressed group views the oppressors to be the ideal that they strive to become while stereotyping themselves and their culture. When the oppressed internalize negative stereotypes, they have the tendency to experience feelings of self-blame, shame (Cudd, 2006), and that they are not deserving of more resources (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996), which also perpetuate the cycle of oppression (Freire, 2000). Thus, oppressed groups learn to think within an oppressive state and visualize a future where they cannot succeed. This type of maladaptive thinking hinders the individual’s capacity to self-actualize and develop a healthy sense of identity (Watts, Abdul-Adil, & Pratt, 2002).

The experience of discrimination and the status of being oppressed also have physical and mental health implications. Research has consistently found that perceived discrimination contributes to psychological distress (Hurd, Varner, Caldwell, & Zimmerman, 2014; Seaton,
Caldwell, Sellers & Jackson, 2010; Watkins, Hudson, Caldwell, Siefert & Jackson, 2011). This association is particularly important for the African American community because they are more likely to experience discrimination when compared to other ethnic groups (Kessel, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999). Once African American adolescents begin to interact with the world, outside of their surrounding communities, their experiences of stress and discrimination increase (Arnett, 2000). This life stage is also associated with increased risk for substance abuse (Doherty, Green, Resinger, & Ensminger, 2008; Hurd et al., 2014; Masten, Faden, Zucker, & Spear, 2008), mood disorders (Hankin & Abramson, 2001), and anxiety and depressive symptoms (Hurd, et al., 2014). Thus, experiences of discrimination may lead to negative self-concepts that affect how one engages with society.

Identity

Identity is a combination of psychological and social well-being. From a psychological point of view, identity involves thoughts and emotions that facilitate how individuals perceive themselves (Greenfield & Reyes, 2014). However, sociologists suggest that the information one receives from society mediates how the individual interacts with society (Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheimschmidt, Keltner, 2012). Identity is a multi-level phenomenon that is an interaction among the person’s environment, culture, heritage, socioeconomic status, education and health (Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheimschmidt, Keltner, 2012; Greenfield & Reyes, 2014; Bowleg et al., 2012; & Bowleg 2013). Thus, all aspects of the individual life should be taken into consideration when trying to understand identity formation (Phinney, 2008). However, little empirical research reflects the multidisciplinary and multi-method strategies needed to actualize the complexity of identity development for African American men.
Erikson’s Identity Theory. According to Erikson (1968), identity is a developmental process that an individual goes through during crucial life stages, which involves central conflicts. One’s ability to explore these conflicts successfully and meaningfully yields healthy identity development. Many scholars have been inspired by Erik Erikson’s work (Côté & Levine, 2002; Kroger, 1996; Waterman, 1992, and Marcia, 1980), and he remains the leading pioneer of identity development research (McLeod, 2008). Erikson’s theory accounts for both the impact the individual has on the environment as well as the impact the environment has on the individual (Erikson, 1968). Thus, identity development involves a multidirectional interaction. Erikson postulated eight pivotal stages that an individual must successfully experience to develop a healthy sense of identity which are (1) trust versus mistrust (2) autonomy versus doubt (3) initiative versus guilt (4) industry versus inferiority (5) identity versus role confusion (6) intimacy versus isolation (7) generatively versus stagnation and (8) integrity versus despair. However, subsequent stages must be mastered in order to move to the preceding stage.

Although many use Erikson’s model of identity development, some researchers (e.g., Worrell, Cross, & Vandiver, 2001; Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, Cokley, Cross, Worrell, 2001; & Diggs, 2013) have argued for a model for African American identity development that explicitly takes race into account.

Generatively Versus Stagnation. Erikson’s generatively versus stagnation stage is most appropriate for this thesis because it focuses on the foundation in which activists identity formation stems from. Although Erikson’s generatively versus stagnation stage occurs during middle adulthood (ages 40 to 65 years), I focus on how this developmental stage is less about the person’s age and more about the cultural and societal obligations that one is obligated to engage in if he/she wants to be accepted by members of the community.
During the generatively versus stagnation stage individuals engage in activities that involve giving back to the community and spending time with youth (Hart, McAdams, Hirsch, & Bauer, 2001). Building relationships is a primary way for African American boys and men to develop friendships, networking systems, and micro-communities that create a dialogue about problems that arise within the community (Bush & Bush, 2013), so building relationships may be an integral part of identity among African American men.

The church within the African American community is one setting in which members connect with each other and discuss sociopolitical and racial discrimination (McCray, Grant, Bechum, 2010). Thus, the church may facilitate growth for African American men because it provides a forum that allows African Americans to self-actualize and reflect not only on themselves but the world around them (McCray, Grant, Bechum, 2010). Individuals in the generative stage think and behave in certain ways that involve giving, producing, and sustaining resources for others (McAdams, St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993).

The underlying theme for the generative versus stagnation stage is a sense of belonging and interdependence (Erikson, 1963). During the generatively versus stagnation stage, individuals build careers, establish romantic relationships, create families and attempt to become productive citizens in society (Erikson, 1986). They are also aware of their skills and the environment in which their skills are best fit. For example, a group of African American adults scored higher than European American adults on a generative scale that measured concern and generative acts (e.g., social support, religious activities, mentorship; Hart, McAdams, Hirsch, & Bauer, 2001), which indicates that African Americans understand the need to feel important and give back to their communities.
However, when individuals do not successfully contribute to society like they think they should they experience what Erikson (1968) calls stagnation. Stagnation is a developmentally delayed process that individuals experience when they are feeling resentful toward cultural and societal expectations. The plight of African American men has been rooted in violence, unemployment/underemployment, suicidal ideation, and school dropout due to inequality and discrimination (Edmund, Edmund, & Nembhard, 1994).

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce (1993), African American men were five times more likely to commit suicide than Black females. However, in 1993 African American men were less likely to commit suicide than their European American male counterparts (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1993). Notably, within the last two decades suicide rates for Black men has increased by 50% while suicidal rate for white men has significantly declined (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1993). African American men in the stagnation stage are less likely to seek psychiatric attention, and as a result, they experience high levels of stress, and are more susceptible to developing mental health problems (Wester, Vogel, Wei, & McLain, 2006). Thus, individuals in the stagnation stage find it difficult to live a meaningful life and often struggle with developing relationships.

Generativity primarily focuses on young, middle, and older adults' abilities to connect with their communities, institutions, and organizations. Generativity is also a psychosocial construct that considers positive aspects of adult development, specific to Westernized societies. Identity is a continuous process and therefore individuals are continuously shaping their identity in order to conform to societal norms (Carlsson, Wångqvist, & Frisén, 2015), which is why it is important to understand how African American men activists and police officers perceive their identity as Black men living in the U.S.
African American Identity Development. The Nigrescence Model has been the most sought out model that researchers have utilized in effort to understand the development of Black identity (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009). Cross was one of the first researchers to formulate a framework that specifically identified the process of Black identity formation (Worrell, Cross, & Vandiver, 2001). The purpose of the Nigrescence Model was to provide the scientific community with empirical evidence that identified concepts and behaviors that represented the Black community while living under oppressive terms (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009). The Nigrescence Model identified three stages a Black American experiences while developing their identity as a Black person, which are (1) the pre-encounter, (2) encounter immersion-emersion, and (3) internalization (Worrell, Cross, & Vandiver, 2001). Of note, the Nigrescence Model has been through three iterations of development.

Each stage has a subset of clusters that the individual engages in during identity development. For example, during the pre-encounter stage the individual will experience assimilation, miseducation, and self-hatred. The basic premise for this stage is that the individual does not identify as being Black and often works in White institutions that neither support nor encourage Black identity development (Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, Cokley, Cross, Worrell, 2001). The encounter immersion-emersion stage is made up of clusters that include anti-white and intense pro-Black involvement. Individuals in this stage experience strong emotions of hatred toward whites and they are highly involved with Black symbolism (e.g., pictures, symbols, and clothing). The internalization stage is also made up of clusters that include Black nationalist, biculturalist, multiculturalist racial, and multiculturalist inclusive. During this stage, the individual is aware of the Black struggle for equality in the US (i.e., Black nationalist), but the
individual also understands the importance of group cohesion and multiculturalism (i.e.,
biculturalist, multiculturalist racial, and multiculturalist inclusive).

Scholars have argued that the Nigrescence model is too simplistic and it does not identify
all Black characteristics, which lead to a more comprehensive Black identity (DeCuir-Gunby,
2009; & Diggs, 2013). A solid Black identity focuses on the collective identity, which includes
all aspects of one’s life such as culture, education, socioeconomic status, health, and family.
Identity formation for African Americans is far more complex than what Cross and his
colleagues postulated, which is why the Nigrescence Model underwent several revisions to
address theoretical concerns (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Worrell, Cross, & Vandiver, 2001; &
Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, Cokley, Cross, Worrell, 2001).

The Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) is another model that scholars
use to understand the identity of African Americans (Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous,
1998). Essentially, the MMRI includes ethnic and racial dimensions of African Americans
(Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). The model postulate four main concepts
members of the African American communities will experience at one point or another: salience,
centrality, regard, and ideology (Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998).

Racial salient identity involves situational and perceptual instances where Black race
influences their thoughts about a particular encounter (Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, &
Chavous, 1998). For example, an African American male police officer may agree with
community members about the discriminating acts that occur within these communities at the
hands of police officers. However, during intense situations the African American police officer
can be persuaded. For instance, the police officer may be inclined to side with fellow police
officers if he feels outnumbered thereby allowing his occupational membership to outweigh his
view about the murders of African American men at the hands of police officers. In some situations, the way the person perceives his racial identity will determine his self-concept (Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998).

Racial salient identity is a combination of situation, perception, and how one interacts in a particular situation (Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Racial salient identity is likely to change given the situational context (Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). For example, a Black person may walk into a predominantly white restaurant and noticed people staring. In that particular moment or in that particular situation the individual is made aware of his or her race.

The second concept of the MMRI model is centrality. Racial centrality is concerned with self-defining characteristics (Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). For example, a woman may identify more with her race than she does her gender or vice versa (Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Unlike the salient racial identity concept, racial centrality identity is more stable and less likely to change (Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). That is, the individual is sure how race plays a part in his/her life.

The third concept of the MMRI model is racial regard identity. Racial regard identity involves negative and positive thoughts about one’s group membership (Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). An individual may start to think about stereotypes or the contributions that one’s group has shared with society. Racial regard is broken down into two subcategories: private regard and public regard. Within the private regard category, the individual is concerned about his thoughts and feelings about being an African American. For example, an activist may have positive thoughts about being an African American but at some point he may experience negative feeling when confronted with discrimination. Additionally,
public regard involves how African Americans think others perceive them (Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998).

The fourth concept of the MMRI model is ideology. Racial ideology involves beliefs, opinions, and attitudes about how members in Black group should behave in society (Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). For instance, gay Black males may not feel accepted by heterosexual Black males because their sexual orientation does not align with the dominant group.

However, in order to operationalize the MMRI, Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, and Chavous, (1998) omitted the salient racial identity concept because it would have been difficult to provide items of salient racial identity on a questionnaire (Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Nevertheless, the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity scale (MIBI) was created in order to define the MMRI. The MIBI has gone through multiple iterations (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997).

The MIBI is a combination of preexisting identity scales as well as items Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, and Chavous (1998) developed on their own. The MIBI consist of three (3) scales centrality, ideology, and regard. However, only ideology and regard have subscales. For instance, the ideology subscale included nationalist, assimilation, minority, and humanist; and the regard subscale included private and public regard (Seller, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998).

The present thesis is important because it will specifically identify how members in the African American community make sense of their identity as activists. Existing models of African American identity use frameworks rooted within European American culture (e.g., MIBI). Also, the MMRI uses whites as comparison groups in relation to African Americans. For
example, the MMRI is concerned about how African Americans perceive themselves in a predominantly European American group. It is necessary to understand the identities of African American men; however, it is equally important not to use whites as the norm for comparison. Furthermore, to my knowledge there are no existing models of African American male identity. Society is constantly changing and within this process of change are a multitude of experiences that African American men are involved in as they go through the identity development process.

Last, I hope to also understand cognitions, behaviors, emotions, and relationships (Patka, Wallin-Ruschman, Murry, & Minich, 2015) of African American men to understand their critical consciousness. Understanding African American men critical consciousness will allow me to identify participants’ abilities to engage in communities by addressing socio-political concerns they may have with local and state representatives about the African American male experiences (Freire, 2000). I strongly believe that an inductive understanding of African American male identity is needed to create a counter-narrative given the current U.S. socio-political context.

**Education.** When considering the identity of African Americans, their educational experiences must be examined and understood. According to the U.S. Department of Education (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013), 81.9% of all public school teachers in 2011-12 were white, non-Latino, and research has shown that white American teachers treat students differently based upon their race, gender, and academic abilities (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009). The makeup of teachers, individuals in power within the education system, reflects that of police officers where the majority of police officers are European American (Harper & Davis, 2010).

When European American teachers treat African American students differently on the premises of their race, African American students tend to develop a cultural mistrust that prevents them from trusting European American teachers in the future. Cultural mistrust occurs
when marginalized groups do not trust European Americans and/or European American institutions. Cultural mistrust within the educational institution can explain the negative impact cultural mistrust has on the academic outcomes and self-concept of African American students (Cody, 2014).

Part of the disconnect between European American faculty and African American students may be due to prejudice and miseducation on the part of faculty. Faculty members’ approach and attitudes toward teaching African American students does not facilitate interpersonal relationships, learning, and student self-concept (Cody, 2014). For example, African American athletes are more likely to experience cultural mistrust in the educational system than non-athletes. African American athletes believe their professors and mentors are not interested in teaching them the academic skills that they need to succeed within the educational system. Thus, the educational system is one of many mediators that facilitate self-concept and identity development for African American students (Cody, 2015).

If African American male students are not able to develop a healthy sense of identity, they are more likely to drop out of school prematurely (Harper & Davis, 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2007). Dropping out of school prematurely exacerbates the development of an unhealthy identity and prevents positive development (Cook, Vauhs, Garcia & Cohen, 2012).

According to Tatum (1997), when Black students are in white institutions or mainstream schools, they tend to group themselves with other Black students because they often feel like they do not fit into the mainstream culture. In many cases, this type of organization, on the part of Black students, leads to peer support and cultivates an environment for positive coping skills, which ultimately helps students cope with the stress associated with not being accepted into the mainstream culture (Tatum, 1997). However, some young Black students neither have the skills
nor the words to communicate the discrimination they are experiencing within a predominately white institution. Black students often find it difficult to communicate what it means to be Black, and in many cases, Black students would rather sit with other Black students because of their shared experience as a member of a marginalized group (Tatum, 1997). Thus, Black students find it difficult to stand out, especially when they are trying to understand something as complex as discrimination.

Class. Most Black Americans enter adulthood with an understanding of their race (Tatum, 1997). Beliefs about racial identity are relatively stable among the Black community, but they may differ in response to experiences (Johnson & Kaiser, 2012). Two of the mediating factors that determine how one perceives his/her racial group are socioeconomic status and racial group identification (Johnson & Kaiser, 2012). Both socioeconomic status and racial group identification bring about different experiences for different classes of Black Americans.

Black participants of low socioeconomic status were less likely to express empathy for Black participants of a higher socioeconomic status. For example, wealthy Black individuals that are victims of discrimination are not always perceived to be fully Black by members of the Black community made up of low socioeconomic families. Individuals that were a part of the lower socioeconomic status viewed wealthy Black participants negatively because they believed wealthy individuals did not experience the same financial burdens as they did (Johnson & Kaiser, 2012). Thus, this indicates that wealthy Black individuals are perceived to be disconnected from their race and are less likely to receive group support even in the face of discrimination.

The rate of unemployment among African Americans is double the rate of unemployment for whites (Weller & Fields, 2011). African Americans had the highest unemployment rate from
2006 to 2010 among all ethnic groups (Athar, Chang, Hahn, Walker & Yoon, 2013). Thus, the experience of unemployment is challenging and can lead to negative thoughts and emotions, if unemployment remains constant (Ferguson, 2012). For example, when African American men do not have the financial resources to provide for themselves as well as their families, their financial state affects them emotionally and physically (Ferguson, 2012).

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; 2013), mood disorders such as anxiety disorders and borderline personality disorders are highly associated with psychological stress and deregulated emotional states, which in most cases can cause vulnerable men to engage in risky behaviors that ultimately impact how men engage in their communities (Meyer, 2003).

**Masculine Identity**

The development of African American masculinity is different from that of other races. African American masculinity stems from European Americans by which African American men take on pre-existing roles established by the dominant culture (Harris, 1995). “Traditional” European masculine ideology involves a man’s ability to accept and conform to masculine norms’ (Wade & Rochlen, 2013). African American men engage in a different set of masculine rules than their white male counterparts. Their lack of adherence to the expectations based on the dominant narrative may have led to stereotypes of masculinity among African American men. For example, European Americans view African American men as hyper-masculine and male chauvinistic (Franklin, 1987), which embodies sexist attitudes, anti-femininity, and aggression (hooks, 2004).

However, historically African American men have been viewed as physically strong and capable of transporting merchandise across slave plantations. Thus, the behaviors of African
American men may be largely rooted in their history as slaves and as an oppressed group. African American masculinity is viewed as dysfunctional, and in most cases, their psychological well-being is grounded in racial discrimination and oppression (Majors & Billson, 1992). Thus, African American men live by a different set of rules than their male European American counterparts yet African Americans are expected to conform to expectations put forth by the domain group.

Furthermore, African American men struggle to adopt traditional European American masculinity, and as a result, they redefine manhood in effort to feel accepted (Crowell, 2011). For example, African American men engage in dialogue with community members about sensitivity and respect for others, moral principles, and equality in relation to socio-political values and racial discrimination (Hunter & Davis, 1992, 1994). Oppression is particularly true for African American men given their history in the U.S. (e.g., slavery and Jim Crow). When European men adhere to sexism, violence, or restrictive gender roles they not only oppress themselves, but African American men as well (O’Neil, 2008). Both European and African American men experience negative emotions about gender role expectations that prohibit them from being the men they want to become (Reilly, Rochlen, & Awad, 2013).

When men are prohibited from being the person they want to become they project negative emotions of devaluation, violation, and restriction on to others (Harris, Palmer, Struve, 2011). Thus, African American men learn to model gender role behaviors that are typically displayed in European men, who historically have not accepted them as their male counterparts. Therefore, the conflict that African American men experience between gender and race is different than European American men because African American men are marginalized within the mainstream population and automatically experience tension given that they can never be

The status of African American boys and men continues to be of concern for mental health care professionals (Wade & Rochlen, 2013). For example, African American men live shorter lives when compared to females and other races (NCHS, 2005). For example, in 2010, African American men had the highest number of new HIV infections (CDCP, 2015). Additionally, African American men have the lowest college enrollment than any other minority group in the U.S. (Harvey, 2003). However, when compared to Latino and European American men, African American men are least likely to report substance abuse and binge drinking (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Service Administration, 2010).

To this end, it is important to understand the perceptions of African American men activists gender role expectations because insight on their lived experiences will provide distinct contributions to the scientific community. Thus, I intend to learn how African American men engage in the day-to-day activities while living in an oppressive society. Therefore, the present thesis is relevant because it specifically investigates the construction of manhood for African American men activists and police officers by obtaining rich details about their lived experiences.

**Second Order Change**

Second order change is a process that focuses on transforming the fundamental ways in which society functions (Jason, 2013). Thus, second order change seeks to eradicate oppressive environments by collaborating with those who are a part of the minority group (Freire, 2000; & Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994). While uprooting oppressive states for individuals can be quite difficult, especially when marginalized individuals do not possess the power to affectively make
change, Jason (2013) contends that change needs to emerge at the grassroots level to first challenge historical practices and political domination. In many cases, that may require a revolution. Movement toward second order change was made during the civil rights era; however, additional progress is required. Before an individual can facilitate change within the environment he/she must be critical conscious.

Critical consciousness is a process of reflection and action that is believed to create thriving communities and second order change (Freire, 2000). Through the process of gaining critical consciousness, individuals learn that culture can be created and transformed through knowledge acquisition and action. African Americans need to develop their critical consciousness to transform society but researchers must also engage in developing their critical consciousness. Researchers need to move beyond the surface level when trying to understand African Americans reflection, dialogue, and actions to eradicate oppression.

In many cases, minorities are expected to be spokespersons for their racial category (Tatum, 1997), especially when something horrific happens such as the killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. When European Americans, try to understand the discrimination and racism that African Americans experience while living in the U.S., they tend to seek members from the African American community for stories and experiences that are related to discrimination (Applebaum, 2005). Thus, the attempt to understand white supremacy in the U.S. is an admirable act on behalf of European descendants, but approaching Black Americans about the discrimination they face while living in the U.S. insinuates that they are a part of the problem rather than the systematic discrimination they face while living in the U.S.

Additionally, when minorities are not able to explain their experiences through racism, white Americans utilize racist experiences to benefit from the social justice movement (Alavi,
Many white Americans have built rapport with the Black community by supporting the notion of equality and justice for Black Americans, but in many cases, white Americans utilize the momentum of the Black movement for their own agendas (Ryan, 1976). This type of exchange between the Black community and white supporters cultivate mistrust in the community and prevent Blacks from developing healthy identities because they are exploited based upon their race and often believe the negative stereotypes that are associated with their racial group.

In order for people in power to understand the impact of racism and discrimination they must actively seek change not only within themselves but they must also transform the dominant culture. This type of thinking can be difficult because it strips the dominant culture of their power. Attitudes are a set of beliefs and feelings held by individuals, and are one of many predictors of behaviors (Ratanasiripong & Chai, 2013). However, other predictors of behavior are less useful than attitudes (Schutz & Six, 1996). More specifically, a person’s attitudes toward a group or object influence the overall pattern of responses toward that group or object.

However, attitudes alone may not predict a specific action. A single behavior is typically determined by one’s intention to perform a behavior, which is in turn rooted in one’s attitudes toward the behavior and cultural norms. Therefore, some argue that high positive correlations between intention and behavior indicate that attitudes may predict a single act (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977).

Those in power create the dominant narrative to serve their own agenda (Rappaport, 1995). Through the use of alternative narratives, researchers, other professionals and community members will be better equipped to work with oppressed groups like African Americans. Often, organizations and researchers transfer practices and policies that work for one community to
other communities, but one model may not fit all settings. The structure of our current system is built upon the dominant narrative. I argue that the scientific community, practitioners, and community members need alternative narratives to understand and address the needs of oppressed groups. I begin to address this gap in knowledge by documenting the narratives of African American police officers and African American activists through semi-structured interviews. The present thesis distinctively contributes to the scientific community by investigating an unexplored topic through the following research questions:

**Research Questions**

1. How do African American men activist construct their identity?
2. How do African American men activist engage in the community?
3. How has recent media coverage surrounding the killings of African American men impacted their identity?

**Chapter 3: Method**

**Research Context**

U.S. society historically and currently marginalizes and oppresses African American men. African American men were enslaved and bought to the U.S. as slaves. Since slavery, African American men have been perceived as a source of physical labor, without the ability to make intellectual contributions to their community and society (Stone, 2006). Power is one of the primary ways that European Americans dominate and control African Americans, organizations, and things (hooks, 2004). Thus, those in power often dominate and control others by exploitation and dehumanization (Freire, 2000). Power over African American men is exerted through both covert and overt forms of oppression.
Historically, covert forms of oppression could be seen in the "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male" where African American males were manipulated by medical practitioners to believe they received treatment for a specific disease when in fact they received a placebo. In modern society, an overt form of oppression against African American men includes the murders of African American males by police officers including, but not limited to, Trayvon Martin in 2012, Eric Gardner in July 2014 and Michael Brown in August 2014.

Since the enslavement of African Americans, both African American men and women have collectively worked together to address racial disparities (Civil Rights Act, 1964). African American activists throughout their history in the U.S. have made conscious efforts aimed toward social and political equality (Szymanski, 2012). While activism may involve violence and confrontational action (Oxford English Dictionary, 2015), it also includes boycotts, strikes, sit-ins, and exercising one's right to vote (Szymanski, 2012). Their goal is to raise the consciousness of the public and create social change, but the voices of African American activists are rarely heard (Maxwell, 2002).

Awareness of African Americans contribution to social and political change is often limited to Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., while ignoring the work of others including, but not limited to, Ralph Bunche, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Angela Davis. While mainstream media and educational systems have chosen to ignore the work of many African American activists, empirical literature has done just the same. Thus, little was known about the experience of African American male activists.
Research Design

Given the limited understanding of African American men within academic literature, it was imperative to explore how African American men constructed their identity. To understand how African American men construct their identity, a qualitative approach was utilized. A qualitative research approach allowed me to explore the context of African American men rather than verify their lived experiences (Patton, 2014).

Qualitative inquiry would provide participants the opportunity to elaborate on their lived experiences as activist. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were used to provide African American men a chance to communicate their experiences, perceptions, and ideas about their identity. I utilized a thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report themes that emerged from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I familiarized myself with the data, coding, identified and defined themes, reread identified themes, and reported the results (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants

Activist Eligibility and Recruitment. African American male activists who were 18 years of age or older participated in the present thesis. Activists engaged in multiple levels of activist works. For example, Seth work involved anti-violence, both Eli and Malachi work involved the justice system and reforming the laws, Curry and Offie engaged in activist work that involved mass incarceration, Jordan activist work focused on the death penalty, and Desmond focused on critical consciences, white supremacy, and liberation.

Participants annual income ranged from $45,000 - $60,000. Participants ages ranged from 30 – 52. However, some participants did not provide their date of births. Participants religious affiliation included three Baptist Christian, one Protestant Christian, one Muslim, and two participants did not provide their religious affiliation. Participants highest level of education
completed was one General Education Certificate (G.E.D.), one Associates of Arts (A.A.), three
Bachelor's degree, one Master's degree, and one participant did not provide his highest level of
education. All seven participants were currently employed. Three participants were married and
four participants were single.

Instruments

Semi-Structured Interview Guide. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ask
open-ended questions that allowed participants to provide in depth and contextually rich
responses (Patton, 2014). The semi-structured interview guide was intended to establish rapport
between me and interviewee. It also allowed for less focus on the order in which questions were
asked and allowed the interviewee some control over the interview (Smith, 1995). For example,
participants were allowed to ask questions at any given time during the interview. The semi-
structured interview guide was developed using Smith's (1995) interview guidelines (Appendix
A). First, I generated a broad range of questions I wanted to ask activists that involved
understanding their role, how they engaged in the community, and their thoughts and feelings
about the recent media coverage about activism. By producing a set of questions beforehand I
allowed myself to critically think about the interview questions and the challenges that may arise
during the interviews (e.g., wording, sensitive areas; Smith, 1995), which is why I asked the
more general questions at the beginning of the interviews and then I gradually asked the harder
questions toward the end.

Third, I utilized a funneling process where I started with broad questions and then
eventually lead into more specific questions (Smith, 1995). Fourth, I considered possible probes
that would generate dialogue in the semi-structured interviews. Probes were used to increase the
richness of the interview process by providing cues to the interviewee about the desirable
response (Smith, 1995). Patton (2002) suggested that probes work best when they were implemented in a natural style and voice.

There were three types of probes I utilized in the semi-structured interviews (e.g., contextual, elaboration, and clarification). Context (e.g., who, what, where, why, when, and how) was useful because it provided rich details that may not be provided by participants when asked the initial question. Elaboration probes encouraged participants to continue to speak about their experiences (e.g., nonverbal and verbal). Clarification probes were incorporated in the semi-structure interviews when I was not sure what the participant meant about a statement or experiences. When using a clarification probe, I asked participants to restate their answer (Patton, 2002).

These probes were used to remind myself to ask participants to provide rich contextual experiences (Appendix A). Additionally, I utilized the semi-structure interview guide to provide participants with the opportunity to explore topics that were of interest to them. For example, activists had the opportunity to answer interview questions that were tailored to their experiences.

At the beginning of each interview, all participants received a short form of the interview guide (Appendix B). The short form interview guide is a reference tool participants are provided with to help guided them through the interview process.

**Field notes.** I utilized field notes during the semi-structured interviews. Field notes allowed me to record what I have seen and heard throughout the research process (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). I wrote field notes immediately after engaging in all parts of the research process. Also, I utilized a narrative approach to write about actions and interactions in chronological order. All field notes were dated. I recorded pertinent information such as where
the interview took place, who was present, the setting, and the activities we engaged in (Patton, 2002). Also, I recorded nonverbal interactions that the audio recorder could not document. For example, one participant's hand raked the table back and forth as he was describing his experiences as an activist, through my clinical experience I have learned that body language is an important feature individuals use to communicate nonverbal cues. Of note, my interpretations were recorded on a separate sheet of paper from the field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). I also documented natural but unexpected behaviors in my field notes. For example, I documented when a participant needed to step out of the interview for a phone call. Additionally, with the guidance of Dr. Patka, I reread my field notes to assess how my interview protocol could be changed.

Audio Recording. I utilized an audio recorder to record participants' responses during the interview process. The purpose of recording the interviews was to decrease any distractions and free my hands from taking notes so that I could concentrate on the interview. In many cases, writing participants' responses verbatim could distract participants and the flow of the interview. By utilizing an audio recorder I increased my chances of developing richer data (Smith, 1995)

My Role and Assumptions. Qualitative research allows the researcher to be an instrument throughout the study’s process (Cieurzo & Keitel, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this reason, I utilized my training as a psychology graduate student with a clinical emphasis and a researcher to guide the research process. Also, I grew up living in a predominately African American community, and I understand the challenges faced by African Americans. For instance, one of those challenges includes understanding the impact of identity and how it either facilitated growth or impeded the development of African Americans while living in a country rooted in white supremacy. For example, I grappled with the idea of how African American men
construct their identity in a society that has dehumanized them, specifically when they were compared to their male white counterparts. My experience as a daughter, sister, wife, and mother to an African American boy raised concerns about how they cope with the stigmatization of being a Black male. As an African American woman, it was important that I not only addressed my concerns, but also the concerns of others who shared the same racial barriers. For example, the prominent African American men that have been a part of my life have been to prison, and as a result, most of them are unemployed. While I was specifically studying men, I was aware of gender differences and believe they need to be further investigated in order to clarify gender difference between African American activists.

**Procedures**

**Sampling.** I recruited participants through purposive snowball sampling. Utilizing a purposive snowball sampling approach allowed me to identify participants’ whose experiences and backgrounds provided information about my research topic (Coyne, 1997). The goal was to recruit as many participants as possible in order to have a broad range of experiences. Purposive snowball sampling is a sampling technique that is utilized in qualitative research (Patton, 2002). Purposive snowball sampling also involves referring participants who knew individuals with shared backgrounds and experiences in relation to African American male activists (Biernacki & Dan Waldorf, 1981).

First, I recruited four activists whose work I know of through my own activist work and social media. At the end of each interview, I asked my participants to connect me with other activists in the Chicagoland area. I followed up with these leads through telephone calls, text messaging, and Facebook©. I repeated this approach until I could no longer recruit activists. Of
note, with the approval of my thesis committee, the present defense only focuses on my first seven interviews.

In the process of sampling, I sampled from four activists engaged in activities that include civic engagement, reparations and ending the death penalty, politics and, criminal justice advocate. After each interview I asked participants for referrals. I collected the data until I could not recruit any new participants. Once I contacted individuals referred through snowballing, I continued to seek participants independently. For example, I contacted several local activists through different mediums (e.g., Facebook, local organizations, and activist meetings) and they either did not return my phone calls or there was a conflict in schedules.

Email Script. When I asked participants to introduce me to other activists, I also asked that they share the potential participant’s email address. Email communication was also used when seeking activists through social media. If received potential participants email address, so I used an email script (Appendix E), which conveyed the purpose of the study and what participation entails.

Telephone Script. I also asked participants to share the telephone number of the individuals they were referring me to. If a telephone number was provided, a telephone script (Appendix F) was used when communicating with potential participants. During the phone conversation, I explained who I am, why I am conducting the research, the reason for me contacting them, and who referred them, and I answered any questions they may have.

All in-person meetings were scheduled through telephone or email correspondence. The participants and I chose a mutual meeting place, but the participants chose the time that best fit their schedule. During these meetings, participants received the informed consent document and short form of the interview guide. All participants were given a chance to read the informed
consent document prior to conducting the interview. Also, I gave a copy of the unsigned document to each participant for his own record. After all questions relating to informed consent were answered, the data collection process began (i.e., semi-structured interviews).

**Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix C).** All participants were asked to complete a Demographic Questionnaire at the end of the semi-structured interview. Participants were asked to provide the following information about themselves: date of birth, gender, level of education completed, employment status (e.g., none, part time, full time), length of current employment, and marital status.

**Pilot of Research Procedures.** Piloting my research materials helped me identify weaknesses or problems relating to my research design. I piloted my procedures with one student peer. I began piloting the materials by sharing the recruitment letter, informed consent, and email and telephone scripts. Information collected during the pilot was not used as actual data. Throughout the pilot, I asked my acting participant to provide feedback on my materials and process. In consultation with Dr. Patka, I made changes based on the feedback gathered through the pilot. For example, I noticed that some questions were redundant. Thus, these questions were removed.

**Ethics**

I have received research ethics training through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI, 2014; Appendix J). Prior to conducting the study, I gained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Governor State University. Also, I made sure that I implemented the Belmont principals (The Belmont Report, 1979) throughout the research process. I implemented the Belmont Principle of Respect for Persons when interacting with participants, as well as when data is disseminated. For example, I made sure I respected
participants’ rights by adhering to the informed consent form and respecting their right to confidentiality. I organized and maintained all records in a secure place until it was time for me to use them, and once I am done with the documents, I will store them in a secure place for a minimum of five years. Also, I implemented Beneficence when interacting with participants by informing participants that they could stop participation at any point during the research process (The Belmont Report, 1979).
Chapter 4: Data Analysis

The present thesis employed a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is not bound to a single theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A thematic analysis can be applied to a constructivist theoretical approach by examining the social processes that impact participants' reality, meaning, experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this reason, I applied a thematic analysis by utilizing a constructivist framework. A constructivist framework is inspired by learning how individuals make meaning of the world around them (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is why I asked questions that are specifically geared toward participant experiences.

Thematic analysis is a technique that researchers use to analyze qualitative data. This process includes identifying themes, analyzing themes, and reporting relevant themes that emerge from the data. I familiarized myself with the data, created a code book so that I could group clusters of information, identified themes, reread themes, defined and named themes, and then reported my results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, all seven interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed utilizing Dedoose 4.5.95 web application whereby I organized codes according to their themes. First, I started with one transcript and read over it to make sure I understood the data (Smith, 1999). Next, I coded the data line-by-line to ensure that I capture the essence of each code. I labeled each line with a code. Of note, some labels were altered because they did not capture the essences of the code. As codes emerged from the data I began to create my codebook.

During this stage, I developed 192 codes. However, I found that I had redundant codes, which I later collapsed into one main code (Smith, 1995). For example, relationships and connectedness were two separate codes that essential meant the same definition. Re-reading the
data allowed me to familiarize myself with the data, which ultimately led me to refining codes and similar definitions. Thus, I went through multiple iterations in order to analyze the data that focused on my research question. For example, combined relationships and connectedness had a total of 28 subcategories, I later group the codes because they both had similar definitions.

By grouping the codes I was able to create a theme that fit both categories. For example, Building Trusting Relationship best fit the category because it captured the information that emerged from the 28 subcategories. I eventually repeated the same analysis steps for the remaining interviews. During the analysis stage, I was able to define two themes that illustrate the stories participants shared. The first theme created a portrait of who an activist is, which identifies characteristics of who the participants are as activists and the behaviors they engaged in (i.e., Building Trusting Relationships, Communication, Knowing the Laws, Emotions, and Ideology).

The second theme explored past and present forms of oppression experienced by the activists and their communities (i.e., Police Brutality and Mass Incarceration). In order to ensure that I followed best practices for conducting a thematic analysis, I wrote field notes at every stage of the data collection process. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), analysis involves a constant back and forth between the entire data set, coding, analyzing, and reporting the data, which is why it was crucial for me as the researcher to write a developed report of all phases of the data collection process. Field notes provided me with a reference in case the data was unclear.

Criteria of Merit

In order to make sure my findings were accurate, I utilized the criteria of merit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In qualitative research this process is also known as transferability (Patton,
I utilized both prolonged engagements and triangulation to support my research findings. For example, I engaged in prolong engagement by building rapport with activists by attending town hall meetings and panel discussions. During these meetings I witnessed activists work in their communities and raise awareness about their concerns. Being able to interact with activists as they engaged in their work (e.g., town hall meetings and panel discussion) provided me with an opportunity to better understand the phenomena of interest. Also, I engaged activists in one-on-one semi structured interviews. Engaging activists in one-on-one interviews provided them with an opportunities to take as much time need to fully disclose their day-to-day experiences.

Also, I utilized the investigator triangulation method as another way to account for an accurate report (Patton, 2014; Carlson, 2010; Bowen, 2005). I consulted with Dr. Patka and one graduate student peer throughout the research process. Throughout the research process I confided in both Dr. Patka and one graduate peer about the transcription and data analysis processes, and they both provided me with feedback, which helped me tailor my analysis so that it reflected the activist community. For example, during the transcription and analysis stage, I discussed codes and themes with Dr. Patka in order to make sure that my depiction of the data was accurate. Prior to revising any codes or themes I received Dr. Patka's approval and then I modify them according to her feedback.

As a qualitative researcher, I am expected to hone the responsibility of transferring my research findings to others so that they may be able to apply my methods in situations that are related to my research topic (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). For example, teachers or lay persons may be interested in identity development for African American men and can utilize my research findings in either classroom settings or workshops. Therefore, my goal was to present adequate
data and information about the research processes while simultaneously providing researchers with information to compare with others.

It should be noted that I was not able to apply member checking to my research findings; however, I plan on utilizing member checking for accuracy (Carlson, 2010) post publication. Member checking is a procedure used to ensure the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations of the data by providing participants a summary of the research findings and checking-in with them to see if the results sum up their experiences (Carlson, 2010). For example, I will email a summary of my findings to the participants and follow-up with the following week to find out their opinions about the research findings (Carlson, 2010). I also plan on noting any disagreements and considering reasons why disagreements exist, if any.
Results

Through thematic analysis of seven interviews with African American male activists, I identified two principle themes that illustrate the stories participants shared. The first theme creates a portrait of who an activist is, which identifies characteristics of who the participants are as activists and the behaviors they engaged in. The second theme explores past and present forms of oppression experienced by the activists and their communities. To ensure confidentiality of all participants, pseudonyms are used throughout this manuscript and specific information about participants (e.g., neighborhoods they work in) are not provided. In order to facilitate a better understanding of each participant’s context, Table 1 presents pseudonyms with general information on each participant.

### Table 1. Participants Pseudonyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Seth</th>
<th>Eli Curry</th>
<th>Jordan</th>
<th>Offei</th>
<th>Malachi</th>
<th>Desmond</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area of Activism</td>
<td>Anti-violence</td>
<td>Reform Laws</td>
<td>Mass Incarceration</td>
<td>Death Penalty</td>
<td>Mass Incarceration</td>
<td>Reform Laws</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When participants discussed their work, they identified core characteristics that they must embody to be successful as activists. Five categories were identified that describe characteristics of an activist: (1) Building Trusting Relationships (2) Communication Skills (3) Understand the Laws (4) Emotions and (5) Ideology. Themes in relation to these categories are presented below.

#### Build Trusting Relationships

Activists create change based upon the relationships they build in communities. Activists believed that their success in creating progressive change was because they promote unity within the community by actively working together. For instance, Eli stated, “You have to find the
coalition of the willing. You know people who have the heart and desire for change and they want to come together and work with you. You build with those people.” In order to create a coalition, participants built rapport with community members. All seven participants, regardless of the type of activist work they engaged in, believed that building rapport with community members was a key feature of being a successful activist. They recognized that they cannot work in isolation, so they have to invest their resources to build rapport in order to create social change. Malachi stated, “I go through a long process of building a lot of relationships with people before I get involved in projects.”

Through rapport building, five activists created trusting relationships, which allowed them to influence and lead the community. In one instance, a young man was thinking about harming an individual, but his friend reached out to Seth and asked him to talk to the young man. Given the rapport Seth and his friend built, they friend was able to trust and confide in Seth to help the friend who was thinking about harming an individual. Seth said, “If you have a relationship with people, they go in a circle they may whisper to you, say man I need you to talk to, my man.” Similarly, Curry believed that building trust within the community would restore the community. He stated “Engage the people and build on the trust and all other aspects, then we could get our communities back. And then we can limit massive incarceration.” Seth noted that he found that homicides and shootings decreased in a high crime neighborhood because of the relationships he built with community residents. He stated,

Unless you know the killer and you have a relationship with the killer, well that person just might listen to you at that moment. That’s the only way you’re going to stop the killings period, so we actually experience a lot of reductions in homicides and shootings in these areas in which we worked in.
Seth also believed that his ability to build trusting relationships with people in high crime areas protected him from danger while visiting these neighborhoods. He stated, "That way you get, you know, put it like this, participation from them. That's big brother. They know I'm not going to tell their business." Notably, the activist and community members both had to work toward building a trusting relationship. Curry described how he put forth the effort to build trusting relationships with youth:

Adolescent or young adults would trust you less, you would have to engage them and persuade them because they been lied to so much. And they have trust issues, and it's kind of hard for them because they want out but they don't know how.

My main thing is if I tell him, I am going to call him at 2, I have to call him at 2.

All seven activists believed that in order to create social change, they would need to work in collaboration with others. Thus, they built trusting relationships with communities they serve and work alongside. Curry discussed how his work with citizens returning from prison has created social change, which may not have been possible if Curry tried to work independently. Curry, a university student who was once incarcerated, firmly believed that returning citizens deserved the right to an education despite their criminal background. However, the Curry was enrolled in a university where he, along with others who identified as having a criminal record, would face expulsion if they did not adhere to specific stipulations set forth by the university. According to Curry,

They [returning citizens] had to keep a certain grade point average, and they couldn't break any local, federal, city laws, including [university] policy and laws, and it's like that's outside of the institution so...if we get a traffic ticket we can
get expelled from school. So we saw that, we rolled up our sleeves, and we started.

Curry and his peers believed that the stipulations set forth by the university were discriminatory, so he began mentoring community members to build a coalition to remove the stipulation off the application. Together, through the group’s effort, they were able to make progress:

We started embracing people, mentoring them. But the convicted felon box was placed on the school application. And some students came to us in the summer and they explained the stipulations, and we just saw that was unfair. We saw discrimination. So we sat down with the president, vice president, and the dean. And we told them what we wanted, and they heard us out. They did take off all our stipulations, but the box is still there.

Although, Curry and his peers were able to remove all stipulation returning citizens once faced at the university, the university still requires applicants to state whether they have a criminal record.

Communication Skills

Seth, Eli, and Malachi expressed that communication is a characteristic of an activist. In order for them to raise awareness on issues they are working on, they believed they must meet the people where they are, meaning that they needed to communicate in language they understand. Seth believed that God blessed him with a gift to communicate with the youth, he stated “One thing that I am grateful for is that God blessed me with an anointing to be able to communicate with our youth...I can go to their block...go to them and speak their language.” The ability to communicate effectively provides the activist with an opportunity to make community members feel like the activist can relate to them.
Being able to communicate effectively is an important feature of an activist. People in the community are more inclined to participate in civil action if they think the activist involved is concerned about problems that reflect their communities. For example, Eli described how he mobilized a community through effective communication:

You see talking to a neighbor, talking about the problem, maybe we have a town hall meeting to see how they can get together and help. You know, and the end results of all that it's just at the communication level that's normally where it starts.

Before activists can provide solutions to a problem, he must understand the people's needs, and one way of doing this is by communicating with community members. Navigating through the sociopolitical context of African Americans is not only difficult for the activist, but it also difficult for the people they serve. Experiencing a traumatic event can be difficult regardless if it is police brutality or a natural disaster. The person(s) involved in a traumatic experience may find it difficult to find the words to describe how he or she feels at that moment, which is why it is important for activists to communicate with community members until they find a solution that best fits that community. The best way to find the solution to a problem is to talk to those who have been effected by the traumatic experience. Malachi described an occasion where he worked with individuals who were displaced after Hurricane Katrina. He stated,

I initially went down there to do social service work. However, I met with as many families who were there...I remember talking with kids who had been in the Super Dome for days. Some girls were getting raped, I mean it was like extreme times, people were killed.
For some activists, the work they engage in depended on the conversations they have with community members. Witnessing families live through a traumatic experience made Malachi switch his initial plan from social service work to working with displaced residents post Hurricane Katrina. Talking to community members helped activists address the concerns raised in the communities they serve and work with.

Understanding Laws

Seth, Eli, and Malachi believed that understanding their rights was a major concern for activists, particularly when it comes to protesting. Seth protested with community members against police brutality, and on one particular day they were marching across a bridge. While protesting, law enforcement tried to prevent Seth and other protesters from marching across a bridge. However, he used his understanding of lawful behavior to continue protesting. He recalled telling the police officer: “What you trying to tell me to move for. We out here on an issue. We law abiding citizens, and we in the right. It’s not against the law to cross that bridge.” He believed that because he knew the law, the police officers did not pressure the protestors to move off the bridge. While Seth’s activist work involves anti-police brutality, he believed that the community needs police officers. For example, Seth explicitly stated that his work does not involve anti-police. When using social media as a platform for his activist work, Seth said, “Every post I make there is a little foot note [stating] we are not anti-police. This will be a peaceful rally and demonstration in your community.”

Eli and Malachi believed that reforming the justice system would better serve the African American community because it affects society at large. While some activists engage in protest to promote unison with community members and bring awareness to their cause, Eli believed combining protest with a court action would better serve the African American community by
creating laws to protect individuals from discrimination. Eli recalls a specific time in U.S. history where African Americans were able to overturn the laws imbedded in Jim Crow. He stated, “In the African American community, some of our greatest causes had been fought when we met a protest with a court action, you know Selma. The march for Selma.” Federal and state laws are supposed to protect American citizens from harm and not condone the abuse that some citizens receive in the U.S.

While the judicial system was established to serve as a guide for American citizens basic rights, one participant in particular believed that the judicial system does not acknowledge the mistreatment (e.g., excessive force and police brutality) African Americans faced in present society. Some police officers abuse their power by harming protesters. However, Malachi stated how he used his knowledge of the law to protect protesters from the mistreatment they received by police officers, he stated, “I volunteer as a legal observer and document the interactions between the police and protestors.” Malachi’s primary purpose was to educate individuals, particularly impoverished folks about their rights and to encourage individuals to exercise their first amendment right.

Emotions

Three participants recognized that being aware of emotions is a good quality; however, one must be able to channel anger into a positive behavior. For instance, Eli described how African Americans first respond to disagreements by fighting. He stated that African Americans must learn to “check your emotions at the door”:

A lot of times, even in our communities we want to fight with people...fist fight, gun fired up, pick some bats up and bust their windows out when they don’t agree with what they think. You can’t think emotionally. You have to think strategy and
resolution first. Emotion and passion is good, but if you channel it, it has to be channeled the right way.

Anger is an emotion that some participants are familiar with; however, anger is not the emotion that drives participants to engage in their activist work. Curry stated, “We was angry, but we channeled that anger in a good way and said we got to do something to reach change.” Both Curry and Offei described the importance of tapping into their emotions because it allowed them to develop a better understanding of themselves and become better activists. An important issue for Curry was dispelling the myth that men do not cry. Curry vividly described how dispelling that myth has made it easier for him to tap into emotions that inspire him to be a better activist. He stated,

And I explain to them that you have to kill a myth. Man don’t cry. You know you’re wired with these emotions to cry. I could’ve sabotage it, if I would have went with my old belief system, my old thinking that man don’t cry. The defense in jail is that you can’t cry. A sign of weakness, so you have to hold all this stuff in. And the only object that gets the truth is you and your pillow. When you are in that cell alone. That’s the only thing that know the whole truth. And when you come out of that cell you have to hold that stuff in and it’s like you just a prison inside a prison. So I was freed in prison.

Like Curry, Offei found his inner strength after crying in reaction to a painful yet insightful experience. Offei described a time when he was in prison reading a letter his mother wrote to the warden asking to finish his prison sentence. He stated,
And it said, hey how you doing. My name is [participant mother’s name]. My son is incarcerated there at [name of prison]. I will like to know if you can put the rest of my son’s time on my sentence.

Offei recalls crying in front of the warden immediately after reading that letter. He vowed that he would do everything in his power to never go back to prison. For Offei, the most profound moment was not that he cried but the fact that his mother offered to serve his time. He compared his imprisonment to the likings of slavery when white slave owners would have propriety rights over African American slaves, he stated, “Because I could have did the time. But it’s the fact that my momma had to beg a white man for her Black son’s freedom. I didn’t like that. I didn’t like that.”

Eli, Curry and Offei understood the importance of emotion and instead allowing anger to fuel their fight for justice and equality, they channeled that pain and anger into their passion for helping minorities.

**Ideology**

While participants promoted equality within the African American community, some participants found it inappropriate to promote equality in solidarity with women and LGBT community. Jordan, Desmond, Seth and Eli described a set of beliefs that were more suitable for a sub-oppressor, a person who takes on the ideologies of their oppressor, particularly in any unjust situations where an individual is subjected to a dehumanizing experience (Freire, 2000).

All four participants used concepts that were contradictory to what activism looks like in present society. For example, Jordan believed that a woman’s place was in the home. He described how his mistrust for women made him question a woman’s ability to be a good person, particularly a woman he coined as a “traveling feet woman”, which is a woman who chooses to work outside
of the home and does not adhere to the traditional roles of a housewife. Jordan described the “traveling feet woman” as such:

A traveling feet woman, woo my gosh. Yo, there’s no telling because then a woman reaches in her mindset, if she wants a relationship or if she just don’t care about the relationship, and she from point A to point B, is never home, but an hour or two, enough to take a shower, look around, grab something to eat and flying back out. Now you wondering how she sleeping.

Jordan also stated that women are more incline to involve the court in their marital problems by requesting an order of protection on their spouse. He believed that an order of protection was a system designed to prevent fathers and mothers from communicating. He stated, “How are you gonna establish something with an order of protection? And I would say about 80% of them are lies because they mad at their partners.” Jordan used this as an example to describe a domestic violence case that one of his peers was involved in. Jordan also believed that women should work through their marital problems despite the oppressive experiences a woman would encounter while in an abusive relationship.

The LGBT community is considered an activist organization that promotes human rights (Ramírez-Valles, Kuhns, Vázquez, & Benjamin, 2014), yet LGBT rights are not a considerable cause according to three participants. Desmond did not support the LGBT civil rights movement. Desmond elaborated about the historical context of the gay culture and the relationship it has with European descendants. He believed that the gay culture is a part of the white culture and should not be linked to African sexuality. He stated,

Europeans lost their humanity and their spirituality thousands of years ago. You have to understand white people’s history. Our children have to read Plato. You
got Plato saying, back in the second century, that white women were not the normal sexual partners for white males. So homosexuality was condoned in their culture. Now, what have they done with you? They have come over here and said well it doesn’t matter who you love. If you’re a Black man wanting to love a Black man, if you’re a Black woman wanting to love a Black woman, that’s your business. Because we have lost our understanding of African human sexuality.

Even though the LGBT community has been engaged in activism, their message and morale is still questioned by people in the African American activist community. Two participants disliked it when the LGBT community social actions were compared to those of the Black Civil Rights. Eli explicitly stated that he does not support gay rights. He believed that the LGBT community have not experienced the level of discrimination that Blacks have while living in the U.S. He stated,

I’m not gay. And I don’t believe in it. I believe in the institution of a man and a woman. I believe that they were saying that this is the new civil rights, and that you know this is the new Black, being gay. I said I feel like that was a mistake. I also told her that her people haven’t been hung by trees and lynched and burnt at stakes, and if they have, it hasn’t been at the level of the Black experience in historical America. We can even take it out of the America and go around the world. So for me I told her I thought it was ill-advised for them to proceed that way and I thought it was an insult.

Seth also described how he believed the LGBT civil rights movement was incomparable to the Black Civil Rights as well. He stated,
And you can never compare the issues with police brutality, excessive force and slavery civil rights, and the Jim Crow era, lynching Black people all the way to the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the LGBT struggle.

One of the most persistent misconceptions held by the sub-oppressor is that one group of people is somehow morally better or worse than another.

**Past and Present Oppression**

All seven participants discussed the relationship between past and present forms of oppression experienced by African Americans with a specific focus on how African Americans today have unequal access to various systems and resources. When discussing past forms of oppression, all participants discussed institutionalized racism, which includes, but is not limited to, Jim Crow laws. For example, Eli defined Jim Crow laws in his own words by stating,

> Jim Crow Laws meaning that you know you could not go in the washroom...you had to have separate facilities and you couldn’t drink out the same fountain, and that was actually...endorsed by the White House at that point in time.

All seven participants worked from the premise that they were not born into equal circumstances when compared to white Americans. In fact, they believed they were born into hopeless situations because of their race. For example, Curry stated, “And you see the hopelessness and despair in your heart. This probably where I am going to get emotional, because you know your limitations, and you know your power.” Participants focused on how Jim Crow laws and other forms of oppression that exist within present society. For example, Seth described an encounter he had with a Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) fraternal organization. A Grand Dragon is a person who is second in command on the hierarchy scale in the KKK fraternal organization. Seth described his experience as such:
He’s a Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. He is based out of the South and we were down with [name of organization] working on a couple different platforms, one being stand your ground. He had protesters out to protest against us doing our march.

While Jim Crow ended nearly sixty years ago, participants are still meet with racist actions by white individuals in the community. Prior to Jim Crow, slavery was the mode of oppression used to manage African Americans. However, Desmond believed although the method of controlling African Americans has changed, the oppressive systems within the U.S. remain the same. He stated,

Do they lynch us now by hanging us on the tree? No. But what is poverty? It is lynching. What is unemployment? It is lynching. What is discrimination? It is lynching. So, all they’ve done is change the mode of lynching Blacks, but the institution of lynching Blacks has never changed.

While African Americans are led to believe they are protected under the U.S. Constitution, African American males are continuously denied their basic rights. All seven participants used their knowledge of macro-level oppression to understand individual level interactions. Curry said, “So...it’s really like history repeating itself, that’s why I do a lot of research on history and study history. It’s like the slave couldn’t read or write. Discrimination all over again.” Such examples were then translated into the day-to-day life of participants. When describing his experience in prison, Offei said, “You know, man I can read, my cellie can’t. My cellmate can’t read.” Relatedly, Malachi discussed the School to Prison Pipeline:

Basically it’s part of the longer narrative called the School to Prison Pipeline or what some folks call it Cradle to Prison Pipeline, but what it does is it look for a
young person growing up in school and the situations and conditions we have that ultimately helped modeled the systems that lead them to prison. If you treat kids like criminals from the age they are in elementary school or high school then you know that’s what they’ll expect.

Instead of being taught, African American students are led to a path of criminal behavior. In some cases, students are displaced from school and sent to hospitals rather than educational institutions that focused on academic attainment. Malachi stated,

I did a lot of work around School to Prison Pipeline. Uh there were excessive brutalities in schools where pepper spraying and macing kids were involved for minor incidences. It’s a problem if...the police officers using the rules in the streets as the same rules of engagement they use with young people in schools. These kids were hospitalized and all these different types of things, so it was a range of different things from behaviors that happen that frankly are in violation of the constitution and unreasonable excessive force, which is violation of the 4th Amendment.

Malachi believed that the school system no longer view African Americans as students, rather criminals or suspects. He discussed why he disapproved of metal detectors in the school. He believed that metal detectors resemble features of a prison. He said, “We need to stop these metal detectors. Some of these schools look like...a prison.” Malachi believed that metal detectors discourage students from excelling academically, especially when the focal points of the school resembles that of a prison.

Just as with the Jim Crow era lynching, the public has witnessed Black males being beaten and/or killed at the hands of white civilians or law enforcement (e.g., Trayvon Martin,
Michael Brown). The similarity between lynching and police brutality is evident in recent media coverage on African American males being killed at the hands of law enforcement. When describing the death of Eric Garner and Walter Scott, Seth stated,

> And they had been messing with him before they choked the man to death. They put him in a lethal choke hold, which was ruled to be illegal. I’m talking about in the courts, in New York, they shouldn’t done that. And they stopped using them chokeholds and they killed that brother on the streets. The situation with Walter Scott in North Carolina...the police shot that man and gonna try to kick a Taser next to his body. But it was all caught on tape.

Similarly, Curry was concerned about holding police officers accountable for excessive force and or killing unarmed African American males. Curry believed that police officers were not held accountable for their behavior and abuse of power. When describing what he thought about the recent media coverage on the killings of African American males, he said, “At the end of the day, I don’t think the cop should have just gotten away scot-free.” The killings of African American men at the hands of white law enforcement speaks to the perils of white supremacy and power, which both are ingrained in the historical content of the U.S.

Laws that are set in place to hold citizens accountable are often manipulated to protect those in power in order to sustain white privilege. White privilege has the power to create and redefine realities. Malachi described a time where he was punished for telling a lie in school that resulted to him writing a paper about ethical behavior. However, unbeknownst to Malachi, he later found out that Edward Kennedy killed a young woman in a car incident while drunk driving. Malachi stated,
Yeah, it’s weird. I remember one time in school I got in trouble. I like lied and I had to write a paper. And it was talking about ethical values and stuff like that. It’s just a weird thing, for example Edward Kennedy was a senator. He ran for president. Edward Kennedy was drunk and he had a woman in his car he drove off a bridge. She died, and it was like forty-eight hours or so before they notified the government. A few years later or a few months later or whatever this guy runs for president of the United States. He never serve time in prison. Had that been me, I’m driving drunk, somebody’s in the car with me, I drive over a bridge, and they die and I don’t notify anybody, I mean it’s a wrap. It’s a wrap for me, but for some folks in this country it means they can run for president.

While Malachi understood the power imbalance between Black and white Americans, Desmond on the other hand, provided solutions to what he believed would uproot police brutality and white supremacy in the U.S. He stated,

You are not going to end police brutality in Chicago, in Philadelphia, in Baltimore until there is a transfer of power from the police that are in our community and the municipality who uses Black people’s tax dollars to fund that. Unless we get that funding and that power, you’re never gonna stop police brutality. It’s not gonna happen...In 1998, 71 Blacks were killed by police. Of those 71, 58 died between 1996 - 1997, it was the highest ever. 2014 and 15 now exceeded that.

Seth, Curry, Malachi, and Desmond witnessed, on several occasions, laws working in the favor of law enforcement and government officials.

Three participants, Curry, Jordan and Offei, were most affected by mass incarceration and their activism centered on the prevention of mass incarceration. Curry defined mass
incarceration as a form of modern day slavery where corporations have inmates work for little or no pay. When describing this form of modern day slavery, Curry said,

So it’s like slavery all over again. And now you come to this time and era, where the prison population is really an industry. You going to have a few free slaves with limited rights...but a nice proportion of our community is going to be locked up.

Many African American households are left to deal with the consequences of their fathers, brothers, and sons being incarcerated at rapid rates. To compensate for the lack of fathers in the home, Offei discussed why he felt the need to work with adolescent males in the community, he stated,

And so you know I have to be there for them because like I said earlier their fathers inside of a prison that hold 2,000 people, [name of another prison] that house 2,200, and every middle joint around this state house 1,900 inmates and we already know 60% of the inmates are African American and probably even more than that. You know we only make up 17% of the state, but we make up 65% of the prison.

Mass incarceration is a strategic method the criminal justice system use to institutionalized African American males. For instance, Curry described how mass incarceration has increased within a 40 year span, “Um, I recall a time back in the 1970s and early 1980s, you had approximately 4 to 8 penitentiaries, and now you have in Illinois over 40.” While Curry and Offei described the consequences of mass incarceration, Jordan specifically spoke about being a product of mass incarceration after serving 28 years in prison for a crime he did not commit. He stated, “Shoot, what motivated me was primarily being wrongfully convicted, being told that I
would die inside of a prison for a crime I know I didn’t commit.” Jon Burge is a convicted felon and former police detective who was notoriously known for torturing more than 200 suspects in order to force false confessions. Unfortunately, Jordan was one of those suspects. Jordan described his experience of helping prosecutors convict the former police detective. He stated, “We was able to put Jon Burge in prison. However we was unable to stop his pension, so he still receives his pension, even though he is a convicted felon. Yep.”

While Jordan’s experience was slightly different than Curry and Offei, both Curry and Offei acknowledge that they committed a crime, all three participants focused on how the past (e.g., Jim Crow) and current penal system (e.g., Massive Incarceration) has consistently oppressed African Americans. Curry stated,

If you break any of them former laws or look at a white woman or European women, and you go up in front of the justice and at that time we had no representation, what’s the chances of me going to jail, there is a good chance. So you go in front of the judge nine out of 10 times you found guilty and they might give you a harsh sentence, five years.

While three activists shared such examples of the past, they also discussed how similar forms of oppression transpire within the judicial system in current society. Curry stated “the three strike law...So you can have two convicted felons go steal a candy bar and get life in prison.” So, not only do African Americans experience oppression, but they experience multiple levels of oppression where stealing a candy bar may be a function of some African Americans not being able to meet their basic needs (e.g. food), which increases their chance of reoffending. Returning citizens with lower levels of formal education and/or job skills were often disproportionally unemployed after release from prison and therefore were more likely to reoffend. Additionally,
the penal system do not equip inmates with vocational skills needed in order to successfully rehabilitate them from poverty. Jordan described why he believed the penal system fail to rehabilitate prisoners. Jordan believed that the penal system preferred inmates to spend the rest of their natural life in prison. He stated,

So the systems option of rehabilitation is to give them these outrageous amounts of time inside of a prison system in hopes that now that they would die in prison, rather than to rehabilitate them is what I'm trying to say.

Given the sociopolitical context of my participants and their level of consciousness of the sociopolitical system, they grappled with labeling their racial and ethnic identities. Seth and Malachi self-identified as Black, Eli self-identified as African American, Curry and Offei self-identified as Moorish American, and Jordan was uncertain. Since there are variations of Black skin tones, Seth was uncertain as to which side of the skin paradox he identified with (e.g., dark-skinned or light-skinned). However, he believed that he is a Black male, Seth stated,

I am a Black man. My mother is a dark-skinned lady like Wesley Snipes. And my father is a light-skinned brother. So I trace my roots to the slave plantation [city, and state]. I'm Black that’s all I know. So I ain’t never tried to be nothing else. By me being a light-skinned brother some people say you might be mixed with this and that. I don’t know right now what I’m mixed with because I never did a genealogy as far as on my father side, but my mother blacker than black.

However, he accepted the term Black and referred to his ethnicity as Black as opposed to African American. Relatedly, Malachi defined his ethnicity as being a Black man. He stated, “I’m a Black man in this country. I had a very Black experience and that’s the way I’m defining it. I’m a Black man I’m not African-American. I’m Black.”
Part of the reason why participants grapple with their race and or ethnicity is because the terms that identify their race and or culture is constantly changing throughout the U.S. Eli preferred the term African American instead of Black because he believed Black was more related to a color and negatively associated with the darkness. He stated, “Because of the undertone of being Black, you know that door is not Black it’s almost black. But Black is acknowledge with darkness. And so I like African American better.” However, he also stated that he is gradually thinking about changing the preferred term of his ethnicity from African American to Asiatic, meaning that the African American human race originated on the continent of Asia. He stated,

But to be honest with you as the days go on I’m starting to like Asiatic. Asiatic is our whole definition, meaning that there’s so many different tones of where we at. It comes from ancient Egypt by the way. And um it refers to the Middle Easterners who refers to Western Asian folks who refers to the Persians and the Jews and the Turkish and the Eastern people who are dark color. They called Asiatic. So that’s our whole gamut of everyone who is involved in our experience. What we look like and everything in between. That is why I chose Asiatic nation.

On the other hand, Curry and Offei self-identified as Moorish Americans. Both Curry and Offei were members of the Moorish Science Temple of America. They underwent a series of schooling to better understand their heritage, specifically the heritage that is not taught in white institutions. Curry recalled a time where he had to read four holy books during the time he was a member of the Moorish Science Temple of America, he stated,

The Moorish Science Temple of America connects back to our history. You not only going to read the Quran, you read the Holy Quran. You read the Circle
Seven. And you read the Bible. You have to study all these books, but on top of that you have to research history. You go back to the Moors of Spain. You go back to Egypt. And it’s like who you were before you got to slavery.

Relatedly, Offei believed that there was a disconnection between Black Americans and their ancestry prior to slavery. He stated that Black Americans were robbed of their history, which is why there is no pride in the community. Curry stated,

I am a Moorish American because I study Islam. And you have to think about the reasons how does anybody describe themselves? They describe themselves from the genealogy they came from. Um for us, that was robbed from us. So when you asked that question, I automatically go nationality and then religion...it ain’t no pride because we don’t know what to identify ourselves as.

Meanwhile Jordan, did not identify with either Black or African American. He described his experience through the lens of a person who have been incarcerated for 28 years. He stated, “It’s so difficult because I don’t understand them. I don’t understand them cause I was raised under a different era. And the different era don’t look like this.” Jordan grappled with the African American culture in modern society. He stated,

To be honest with you. Uh...my gosh to see how things have changed to where we wore regular hair. Now today the guys got their hair all layered with the dreadlocks. The sistas wearing wigs....I’m like wow what’s going on.

After spending nearly 30 years in prison Jordan felt there was a disconnection between himself and his community. The African American experience encompasses a wide range of encounters that affected each person differently. Thus, their experiences is what makes each participant unique in their fight for justice and equality.
Chapter 5: Discussion Section

This thesis aimed to understand the day-to-day experiences of African American male activist. More specifically, seven African American male activists were interviewed to address three research questions (1) How do African American male activists construct their identity? (2) How do African American men activist engage in the community? (3) How has recent media coverage on the killing of African American men impacted the identity of African American men? The data explored empirically underexplored concepts that better help understand the lived experiences and identity of African American male activists (Patton, 2014; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). In order for activists to bring awareness to their cause, it was imperative for them to embodied five unique characteristics, which were (1) Building Trusting Relationships (2) Communication (3) Understanding the Laws (4) Emotions and (5) Ideology.

When creating positive change in the community, building trusting relationships was the most consistent term that emerged from the data. For example, regardless of the work participants engaged in, all seven participants believe that building rapport was an essential feature of an activist. African American males built relationships because they seek to establish friendships, networking systems, and micro-communities that generate dialogue about the problems that rise in the community (Bush & Bush, 2013). Seth decreased homicides and shootings in high crime neighborhoods by building trusting relationships with community members.

Working together with community members helped activists increase positive outcomes and promote unison between themselves and the community. This is a particularly useful approach given that past research has found that community members are more likely to engage in activist work and promote positive change when their thoughts and or feelings are included in
developing the solution (Drescher, Korsgaard, Welpe, Picot, Wigand, 2014). Furthermore, activists had to be transparent during their engagements because adolescents in the community had been lied to so much that they felt the need to build a wedge between the activist and them. An activist's ability to make individuals feel like they could trust him was an important characteristic, and in order for an activist to maintain trust in the community he had to remain authentic.

The term authentic was used by participants to capture the behaviors of an activist, which essentially is someone who is consistent with his or her inner thoughts and feelings (Avolio, 2005). When community members were able to trust an activist they were more likely to protect the activist while visiting their communities. For instance, Seth worked in high crime areas, but the rapport he built in these communities had a positive effect on community members and overtime they began to trust him.

Communication was an important feature of an activist because in order for activists to bring awareness about the work they engaged in, they believe they needed to communicate in a language community members understood. For example, Seth's ability to communicate with youth provided him with the opportunity to relate to them. Thus, increasing his chances to continue to work in these communities. Through effective communication, individuals were able to develop important interpersonal skill that allowed them to collaborate, motivate, and empathize with others.

Talking to community members also increased engagement within the community by encouraging attendance at town hall meetings to address the community's concerns. Furthermore, talking to people that were affected by natural disasters changed the way some activists engaged in their activist work. For example, Malachi imagined his family (e.g., parents,
siblings, grandparents) being affected by Hurricane Katrina, which made him work harder for families affected by the natural disaster. However, his ability to talk to these families helped community members speak about problems in their communities, despite recent research eluding to Blacks speaking less socially appropriate (e.g., polite, sensitive, cooperative; Carlson & Crawford, 2012) within leadership roles. Appropriate communication skills provided activists with an opportunity to learn about the community needs.

Before an activists could organized a protest or rally, he must have a thorough understanding of the laws. In some instances, African American protesters and activists were harmed during civil engagements on the basis of their race (Davenport, Soule, & Armstrong, 2011). Police officers are more likely to be present at African American protests than at white protests; and during these protest, police officers are more likely to make arrests, use violence, and use violence with arrests (Davenport, Soule, & Armstrong, 2011). Although Seth and Eli encounters with police officers did not include violence, Seth and Eli still were met with discriminatory acts on the part of police officers and local residents. Seth described an encounter where he was at a protest and police officers threaten him and his colleagues to move off the bridge.

Similarly, Eli discussed an encounter he had with a member from the KKK who protested against him and his colleagues while engaging in their activist work. The dominant narrative continues to inflict stereotypical attitudes and prejudice values on African American activists and protesters, especially when activists and protesters pose a threat to the dominant group. When protesters addressed concerns with political officials and policy makers, law enforcement were more likely to enforce malicious acts in order to maintain power and social control (Ratliff, 2011).
Protestors that utilized strategic methods such as sit-ins, boycotts, and marches were more likely to be beaten, arrested and jailed by local police officers (Warner & McCarthy, 2014). Thus, the use of violence is deemed socially acceptable when protecting the power of the dominant group. Protesting in large numbers increased the chance that police officers would be present at protest. Police officers were more likely to be present at protest that involved large crowds (Ratliff, 2001; Warner & McCarthy, 2013). Thus, African American protestors and their allies were viewed as a threat because they organized large groups of people that questioned the foundation of U.S. society.

Traditionally, African American men have adopted European American standards of masculinity. As a result, African American men are continuously renegotiating their masculinity while living in the U.S. (Crowell, 2011). However, when men are not adhering to masculine norms there are more likely to experience symptoms of depression and are least likely to seek professional help. Thus, increasing their chances of depression and suicidal ideation (Branney & White, 2008).

While European Americans managed to discredit the African American male image with common stereotypes such as Sambo, Jim Crow, and Savage (Green, 1999); African American male activists have been able to use their experiences of prejudice and discrimination as teachable moments to further their understanding of the oppressive society they live in. For example, when faced with opposition while engaged in their activists work, participants channeled their anger into efforts that were more constructive and served a purpose for their cause. For many men, masking their emotion is a protector factor they use to suppress pain they have experienced (Crewe, 2014). Emotion became important in relation to one of the biggest misconception of being a man, which is that “men don’t cry” (Vogel, Heimerdinger-Edwards,
Hammer, & Hubbard, 2011). Indeed activists were saying that emotions are important and should be expressed. However, they were also conveyed that males should not allow their emotions to defeat them, instead they should channel the anger and pain into a worthy cause.

Surprisingly, some participants exhibited heterosexist and homophobic attitudes. While activists work include fighting oppression, some participants were oppressive themselves. Oppression is not limited to a single social group (e.g. race, gender, financial status); rather it is a combination of multiple social groups that one is assign to. For example, an African American man and an African American woman may both experience racism; however; they may experience racism from two separate perspectives, which is an indication that gender and biological sex mediate how one experience racism (Williams, 2012).

Belonging to multiple social groups could potentially subject all humans to oppression at one point in time or another. Thus, oppression is a system that the dominate group created in order to maintain social inequality (Watts, Griffin & Abdul-Adil, 1994). During the dominant group’s quest for inequality, subordinate groups developed similar attitudes and values of entitlement and privilege (Freire, 2000). Regardless of race, the heterosexual group is the dominant group whereby sexual minorities are treated less than human because of their sexual orientation. For example, a person who is gay, lesbian or bisexual will not receive heterosexual privileges as someone who is heterosexual. LGBT are more likely to experience discriminatory acts that involve sexes remarks and violence (Williams, 2012). Thus, creating an environment that heterosexuality is the only “normal” and acceptable sexual orientation there is (Adams, Bell, Griffin, 2016).

Participants forgot that segregation is the method white supremacist used to perpetuate the cycle of oppression (e.g., separate but equal laws). The LGBT community (e.g., Black Lives
Matter) is an active force that focuses on social justice issues that includes, but is not limited to, excessive force and police brutality. By not acknowledging the strife that women and the LGBT communities have endured in their quest for equality, Jordan, Seth, Eli, and Desmond are essentially accepting prejudice thoughts and stereotypical attitudes toward sexual minorities. Individuals that received privileges by the dominant group have an important role to challenge the status quo. Throughout the history of mankind, people have collectively work together to fight oppression despite the privileges they received from the dominant group (e.g., white abolitionists and middle - and - upper class antipoverty crusaders; (Adams, Bell, Griffin, 2016), and the participants of this study should do nothing short of fighting for justice and equality for all humans.

African Americans are explicitly and implicitly told they are worthless and that their citizenship in the U.S. is not valid. Participants discussed institutionalized racism (e.g., Jim Crow) and the plight of Black males in which life opportunities are grossly limited based on the racial narrative constructed in the U.S. Curry discussed how the community he serve felt hopeless despite the resources the community pulled together. Oppression has robbed many minorities from developing their full potential as humans both psychologically and socially (Freire, 2000). Participants believed that past forms of oppression still exist in present society. For example, Desmond described how the discrimination shifted from hanging Blacks by a tree to Blacks living in impoverished neighborhoods with high unemployment rates. For instance, from 2006 to 2010 African Americans had the highest unemployment rate among all ethnic groups (Athar, Chang, Hahn, Walker & Yoon, 2013).

Discrimination is a method that oppressors use to sustain resources and maintain privileges (Freire, 2000). The dominant group utilizes power to manipulate marginalized groups,
which also provides them the ability to influence and control marginalized groups (Freire, 2000). Oppression exists at multiple levels, which is why it is important to consider the narratives of the participants as they described individual, community, and institutional levels of oppression they face while living in the U.S.

Perceptions of law enforcement in predominately Black communities are negative (Gau & Brunson, 2010). Thus, a significant amount of individuals within these communities do not trust law enforcement due to police officers and detectives abusing their privileges. More specifically, African Americans living in distressed urban neighborhoods believed they were subjected to aggressive police practices regardless of how they dressed or walked, and whether they were alone or with others (Gau & Brunson, 2010).

When community members do not trust police officers they are more likely to resist authority and challenge the dominant narrative. For example, Seth discussed how he and community members were protesting on a bridge, but shortly after they began protesting police officers threaten them to move. Before Seth moved, he questioned police officers right to make him move. Resisting the dominant narrative can lead to aggressive behaviors on behalf of the police officers. Thus, indicating that police misconduct seemed to be a part of the tactics the penal system use to control civic engagement. Relatedly, violence is another tactic that police officers and detectives use to perpetuate the cycle of injustice while serving the needs of the dominant group.

In many cases, police officers and detectives have abused their privilege in cases similar to Jordan where he was tortured and coerced to confess to a crime he did not commit. Black men living in urban areas are more likely to experience police brutality and other volatile (e.g. torture) tactics at the hands of law enforcement (Harris, 2013). By wrongfully convicting others, police
officers are dehumanizing those who are oppressed, and justifying their wrongdoing by sending innocence men to prison in order to avoid feelings of guilt (Freire, 2000).

Mass incarceration is one of many concerns for the African American community (Majd, 2011). As stated in Curry’s interview, Illinois alone has over 40 prisons. Impoverished and uneducated Black males are targets of the judicial system, and in most cases these men and their families are left to deal with the consequences of not having their fathers in the home (Majd, 2011). By the age of 14, 50.5% of Black children will witness their fathers imprisoned (Wildeman, 2009). Black males are incarcerated 6.5 times more than their white counterparts (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2011).

Initially, prison was designed to rehabilitate inmates by providing them with resources and tools to develop vocational skills that will enable them to be productive citizens upon their return to society. However, within present society, African American men are treated like property instead of human beings. For example, it cost roughly $22,650 to house one inmate per year (Stephan, 1999). Major corporations have been able to capitalize from private prisons and their stockholders (Welch & Turner, n.d.). Plus, African American men return to society worse off than when they left for prison (Civil Rights, 2015). For example, there are currently 2.3 million inmates in the U.S., and African American males make up 1 million of the prison population (CJFS, 2015), which indicates that no effective rehabilitation has taken place and African Americans are more likely arrested and found guilty.

Participants preference of how they identified racially and ethnically varied. For example, participants self-identified as Black, African American, and Moorish American. However, one participant was unclear about his race and ethnicity. In many instances, professionals do not identify the terms race and ethnicity correctly and they are often mistaken for the same definition.
(Cokley, 2005; Smith, 1991; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998; & Phinney, Horencyzk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001), which is an indication why participants did not understand the term race versus ethnicity. Participants did not see the need to view ethnicity and race as two separate concepts, mainly because they used the terms interchangeably as they shared their experiences. The interchangeable terms may be a function of society where terms describing the African American has consistently changed within the U.S. (e.g., Negro, Black, and African American).

Limitations

As with any research study, the present study had several limitations. The limitations of this thesis included sample size and geographical region of participants, time frame and resources available, and research design. Based on the approval of my thesis committee, data from only seven of the twelve activists were analyzed. All participants were African American males. Thus, their experiences were unique and not necessarily generalizable to other areas in the African American community. Also, it should be noted that the data emerged from one region of the Midwest and the activists that participated in this thesis may have been different in their responses from activists in other regions. Involving a larger sample size of the population would have increased the chance of highlighting day-to-day experiences of African American activists across multiple domains.

Other limitations of the study focused on time frame and resources available. Transcribing the data took longer than anticipated. Transcription is an integral process in the qualitative analysis; however, transcribing the data was a tedious task (Matheson, 2007). Thus, I reduced the number of interviews I transcribed and analyzed in order to report my research findings in a timely manner. Due to graduation requirements, I was limited in my ability to
engage in longer periods of transcribing data. While transcribing I produced large amounts of data. For example, in Jordan's interview I transcribed 126 pages of data. Also, I experienced difficulties with snowball sampling. During the recruitment process, participants were hesitant to give referrals of other activists they worked with in the community. Some participants had to ask their colleagues for permission prior to giving me the referral. Plus, in order for me to obtain referrals I had to followed-up with participants on several occasions. Some participants forgot to provide referral information.

A mixed method design may have provided more richer or contextual information. By utilizing a mixed method design I would have being able to compensate for weakness presented in the qualitative design (e.g., generalization). While the goal of the present thesis was not generalization, the focus of this study centered on transferability so that future researchers could apply identical methods to environments and institutions they are more familiar with. Also, a mixed method design would have given me the opportunity to utilize a questionnaire. Combining a racial and ethnicity identity questionnaire with the semi-structure interviews would have provided rich data and given a more accurate description of African American male identity formation.

Implications

The present thesis aimed to explore how African American male activists construct their identity through an inductive, qualitative framework. Many African American men grapple with their identity because their identity was developed through the lens of the dominant narrative, which is a false narrative to serve the purpose of the dominant group (Rappaport, 1995). Given my findings, future researchers should continue to explore and understand African American males' experiences while living in an oppressive society. The findings from these stories will
help professionals understand how African American men stay encouraged (or not) despite the discrimination they face while living in the U.S. The present study distinctively contributed to the scientific community by investigating an unexplored topic about African American male activists. A key strength of the qualitative design is the rich narratives it provided from all seven participants. Thus, the present thesis had two goals.

The first goal was to identify characteristics of African American male activists. The second goal was to explore past and present forms of oppression experienced by participants and their communities. The findings from this research provided examples of day-to-day experiences of African American male activists. To this end, it is important to understand the perceptions of African American male activists and their gender role expectations.
References


Bowleg, L. (2013). "Once you've blended the cake, you can't take the parts back to the main ingredients": Black gay and bisexual men's descriptions and experiences of intersectionality. *Sex Roles, 68*, 754-767.


Appendix A

Activist Interview Guide

1. How long have you been an activist?

2. Please tell me about your work as an activist.
   
   Probe: What is the focus of your work? Education, race, women’s issues
   
   Probe: How do you engage in activism? Protests, media
   
   Probe: Please tell me more about that.

3. What motivated you to become an activist?

4. Do you work with other activists?
   
   Probe: Tell me about the people you work with.
   
   Probe: What is your relationship like with them?

5. Can you describe the people you work with?
   
   Probe: Race, gender, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status?

6. In your opinion, how do you view activism in your community?
   
   Probe: Active or inactive?
   
   Probe: Tell me more?
   
   Probe: Issues of interest, Demographics of activists, barriers, strengths
   
   Probe: How do you define your community?

7. What sources of support do you use?
   
   a. Church?
   
   b. Counsel from leaders in the community?
   
   c. Neighbors?
   
   d. Community organizations?
e. How do you use these support?

f. Which support system do you find most helpful?

8. What type of information do you use to shape your understanding of your community’s needs?
   a. Facebook?
   b. News?
   c. Books?
   d. Radio?

9. How has your community responded to you being an activist?
   a. As a man?
   b. Father?
   c. Brother?

10. When you think about your experiences as an activist, what stands out?
    
    Probe: Why does it stand out?

11. Can you describe how people treat you with the recent media coverage on activists?
    a. Physical?
    b. Verbal?
    c. How does this make you feel?

12. How do you make sense of the recent media coverage on violence against African American men?
    a. Protest?
    b. Speak with peers?
    c. March?
13. Tell me how you understand your race and ethnicity

   Probe: how do you prefer to identify yourself racially and/or ethnically?

14. Is there anything else you would like to share with me that you have not yet shared?
Appendix B

Activist Short Form

1. How long have you been an activist?
2. Please tell me about your work as an activist.
3. What motivated you to become an activist?
4. Do you work with other activists?
5. Can you describe the people you work with?
6. In your opinion, how do you view activism in your community?
7. What sources of support do you use?
8. What type of information do you use to shape your understanding of your community’s needs?
9. How has your community responded to you being an activist?
10. When you think about your experiences as an activist, what stands out?
11. Can you describe how people treat you with the recent media coverage on activists?
12. How do you make sense of the recent media coverage on violence against African American men?
13. Tell me how you understand your race and ethnicity?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share with me that you have not yet shared?
Appendix C

Demographic Questionnaire

Directions: The questions below ask for information about you. Please complete the questions to the best of your knowledge.

1. What is your date of birth?

   ___________ / ___________ / ___________  
   Month      Day       Year

2. What is your religious affiliation (select one)?

   □ Protestant Christian
   □ Roman Catholic
   □ Evangelical Christian
   □ Jewish
   □ Muslim
   □ Hindu
   □ Buddhist
   □ Other (print religion): _______________________________
3. What is the highest level of education you completed (i.e., GED, high school diploma, some college, college degree)?

4. What is your employment status?
   - Full-time
   - Part-time
   - Unemployed and looking for work
   - Unemployed but not currently looking for work

5. What is your marital status?
   - Single, never married
   - Married or domestic partnership
   - Separated
   - Divorced
   - Widowed
   - Other (please specify)

6. What is your annual household income?

7. How many individuals are dependent on you financially?
   - 0
8. Please list email address below:

________________________
Appendix D

Recruitment Letter

Dear [Potential Participant Name],

My name is Tenille Wallace and I am a Clinical Psychology student at Governors State University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study that aims to understand how African American men, specifically activists and police officers, construct their identity. You were selected to participate in this study because you are either an activist or a police officer.

African American men identity formation is important to the scientific community. However, I believe that it is an underexplored topic in research. If you choose to be in this study, I would like to interview you about your experience as an African American activist or police officer.

The interview will last about 60 minutes. You have the option to choose where the interview will take place: either at Governors State University (GSU) in a private room or at another public facility. Should you choose to meet somewhere other than GSU, please make sure that the space has a private area to conduct the interview, and I will make the arrangement for us to meet.

The probability of harm or discomfort anticipated is no greater than what you experience in daily life. For example, discussing experiences you may have around race, class, and gender. However, you may feel good about helping me learn more about African American men activists and police officers identity. Also, the data from this study will inform the scientific community about African American men identity.

To protect your privacy, your name and any identifying information will not be shared with anyone other than myself and my advisor. If the results of this study are published or presented, I
will not use your name or any identifying information. If you decide to stop your participation, you will not face any negative consequences, and I will not be offended or upset.

If you have questions about the research, you can ask the investigator, Tenille Wallace by calling her at [redacted] emailing her at [redacted]; or you can ask Dr. Mazna Patka at [redacted] emailing her at [redacted]. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you can contact the co-chairs of the Institutional Review Board at Governors State University, Dr. David Rhea [redacted] and Dr. David Schuit [redacted].

Sincerely,

Tenille Wallace, B.A.

Graduate Clinical Psychology Student
Hello,

My name is Tenille Wallace. I am a Clinical Psychology student at Governors State University. I am contacting you because I’m conducting research on African American men identity, specifically activists and police officers. I am seeking participants from both groups to participate in my study. The proposed study aims to examine how African American men, specifically activists and police officers construct their identity. Identity is a combination of psychological and social well-being. Identity is a multi-level phenomenon that involves the person’s environment, culture, heritage, socioeconomic status, education and health, which is why I am interested in further examining the relationship between these variables and the individual.

I will be conducting the interviews in June 2015. The interview questions seek to understand your experience as an African American activist or police officer. The interview will last about 60 minutes. You have the option to choose where the interview will take place either at Governors State University (GSU) in a private room or at another public facility. Should you choose to meet somewhere other than GSU, please make sure that the space has a private area to conduct the interview, and I will make the arrangement for us to meet.

Participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. The probability of harm or discomfort anticipated is no greater than what you may experience in daily life. For example, discussing experiences you may have around race, class, and gender. You may decline to answer any
questions presented to you during the interview, and you may also terminate the interview at any
time.

I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional
Review Board at Governors State University. If you have questions about your rights as a
research participant, you can contact the co-chairs of the Institutional Review Board at
Governors State University, Dr. Praggyan Mohanty at [insert email] and Dr. Renee Theiss at
[insert email]. Dr. Mohanty and Dr. Theiss can be reached at [insert contact information]. However, the
final decision to participate is yours.

After all of the data has been analyzed, you will receive a summary of the research results.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email and I will provide additional
information about the meeting time and place. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Tenille Wallace, B.A.

Graduate Psychology Student
Appendix F

Telephone Script

P = Potential Participant
I = Interviewer (Tenille Wallace)

I: May I please speak to (name of potential participant)?

I: My name is Tenille Wallace and I Clinical Psychology student at Governors State University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study that aims to understand how African American men, specifically activists and police officers construct their identity. You were selected to participate in this study because you are either an activist or a police officer in Illinois. I recently mailed you a letter about my research, and I wanted to know if you would be interested in learning more about my study. Is this a convenient time?

P: No, could you call back later (agree on a more convenient time for Tenille to call back).

OR

P: Yes.

I: Background information:

- The proposed study aims to examine how African American men, specifically activists and police officers construct their identity. Identity is a combination of psychological and social well-being. Identity is a multi-level phenomenon that involves the person’s environment, culture, heritage, socioeconomic status, education and health, which is why I am interested in further examining the relationship between these variables and the individual.

- I will be conducting interviews starting on (insert date)

- The interview questions seek to understand your experience as an African American activist or police officer.
The interviews will last about 60 minutes, and would be arranged at a time and location convenient for you.

Participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. The probability of harm or discomfort anticipated is no greater than what you experience in daily life. For example, discussing experiences you may have around race, class, and gender.

You may decline to answer any of the interview questions you do not wish to answer and you may terminate the interview at any time.

I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and approved Institutional Review Board at Governors State University. However, the final decision to participate is yours.

After all of the data has been analyzed, you will receive a summary of the research results. You will have the opportunity to provide feedback on the summary.

If you are interested in participating, we can set up a time, date, and location to meet for the interview.

P: Sure

I: What is the best location, time, and date for us to meet? (DECIDE ON TIME). If any questions or concerns arise, please feel free to contact me at (773) 791-4918. Thank you for your time.

OR

P: No, I am not interested in participating.

I: That is not a problem. May I know why you are not interested in participating?

Thank you for your time.

I: Goodbye.

P: Goodbye.
Appendix G

Informed Consent

African American Men Activists and Police Officers Identity Development

I, Tenille Wallace, am asking you to participate in my study. This study is being conducted under the guidance of my advisor, Mazna Patka, PhD. The purpose of this form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the present study. Please read this form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the study, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a participant, and anything else about the study or this form. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study.

Purpose of this Study

The proposed study aims to examine how African American men, specifically activists and police officers construct their identity. Identity is a combination of psychological and social well-being. Identity is a multi-level phenomenon that involves the person’s environment, culture, heritage, socioeconomic status, education and health, which is why I am interested in further examining the relationship between these variables and the individual.

Procedures

If you choose to be in this study, I would like to interview you about your experience as an African American activist or police officer. The interview will last about 60 minutes. You have the option to choose where the interview will take place either at Governors State University (GSU) in a private room or at another public facility. Should you choose to meet somewhere other than GSU, please make sure that the space has a private area to conduct the interview, and I will make the arrangement for us to meet. Depending on which group you are a part of (i.e., activist
or police officer) will determine how many interview questions you will need to answer. For example, an activist’s will answer 12 questions and a police officer will answer 13 questions.

During the interview, I will ask an activist:

• What motivated you to become an activist?

During the interview, I will ask a police officer:

• Tell me about you role as a police officer?

You do not have to answer every question.

With your permission, I would like to audio record your interview so that I can have an accurate record. The audio recording will be saved on a secure password protected computer. I will transcribe your interview and assign a number to the transcript so it does not have your name or any identifying information. Please indicate below whether or not you give your permission for me to audio record your interview. If you do not give permission to audio record your interview, I will take notes during the interview to document your responses. Only my advisor and I will have access to the research materials (e.g., audio recording, transcriptions, and informed consent document).

**Possible Risks**

The probability of harm or discomfort anticipated is no greater than what you experience in daily life. For example, discussing experiences you may have around race, class, and gender. To protect your privacy, your name and any identifying information will not be shared with anyone other than myself and my advisor. If the results of this study are published or presented, I will not use your name or other identifying information. If you decide to stop your participation, you will not face any negative repercussions, and I will not be offended or upset.
Benefits of this Study

You may feel good about helping me learn more about African American men activists and police officers identity. Also, the data from this study will inform the scientific community about African American men identity, specifically activists and police officers.

Participant Statement

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to participate in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later on about the research, I can ask the investigator, Tenille Wallace by calling her at [redacted], emailing her at [redacted]; or you can ask my advisor Dr. Mazna Patka at [redacted] emailing her at [redacted]. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you can contact the co-chairs of the Institutional Review Board at Governors State University, Dr. Praggyan Mohanty at 708-[redacted] and Dr. Renee Theiss at [redacted]. Dr. Mohanty and Dr. Theiss can be reached at [redacted] However, the final decision to participate is yours.

Audio Recording

_______ I give my permission for the researcher to audio record my interview.

_______ I do not give my permission for the researcher to audio record my interview.
Consent

________ I give my consent to be interviewed.

Participant Printed Name

Participant Signature  Date

Investigator Signature  Date
Appendix H

Resources

The Black Youth Project

The Black Youth Project examines how the attitudes and culture of African Americans between the ages of 15 and 35 influence their decisions and behaviors. It is an online project where anyone can access their research and ideas. The website’s goal is to provide information and create conversation for empowerment and development among African American youth. It provides features for research, hip hop lyrics, curriculum ideas, and research data.

http://www.blackyouthproject.com/

Chicago Urban League

The Chicago Urban League has helped people find jobs and affordable housing. They are advocates for educational equality and social justice. This organization also prepares people for work opportunities. They also provide mentoring and counseling. There are three programs that were designed to help African American men and boys: GED Program, Training-to-Work, and the Urban Youth Connection.

http://www.thechicagourbanleague.org/site/default.aspx?PageID=1

Link Unlimited Scholars

Link Unlimited Scholars college prep opportunities for disadvantaged African American youth. It provides mentors and leadership development for youth’s educational success. They also provide tutoring and study skills programs. They also have a college readiness programs, including ACT prep, college essay and financial aid workshops, college counseling, and college
campus tours. They believe in preparing students for “professional success and personal fulfillment.” http://linkunlimited.org/web/

100 Black Men of Chicago

100 Black Men of Chicago believes in enhancing educational opportunities of African American men. This organization provides mentors for African American males by pairing them with successful African American professionals. The organization believes in the intellectual development of youth and the economic empowerment of the African American community. To succeed in these aspects, they believe in the following values: respect for family, spirituality, justice and integrity.

http://100bmc.org/

Mercy Home for Boys and Girls

Mercy Home for Boys and Girls is a Catholic organization that provides a treatment home for Chicago youth. They also provide Aftercare support for former residents. Mercy Home also provides community and site based mentors for youth. The Home promotes educational and life skill development. They are also committed to raising awareness of Chicago youth in need of assistance and encouraging others to help them.

http://www.mercyhome.org/

National Coalition for the Homeless

National Coalition for the Homeless discusses how African Americans make up the majority of the homeless population. In Chicago 77% of the homeless population is African American. The National Coalition for the Homeless also supports the Bringing American Home campaign. The campaign is set on ending homelessness in America.

http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/minorities.html
The Social Science Research Council

The Social Science Research Council has organized an African American youth activism to face the kinds of inequalities that global justice activism addresses. They are addresses locally in their own schools and communities. This organization recognizes African Americans are often misrecognized in global situations. Cathy Cohen from the University of Chicago and Shawn Ginwright provide their own insight to the African American youth activism and their challenges with negative stereotypes.

http://ya.ssric.org/african/

Truth Revolt

This video takes perspective from African Americans on their political views. They express how they want more opportunities and not just an easy way out of hardship. This shows African American activism from a political perspective as well as “black on black crime” in Chicago.