EXPLORING THE ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT OF HIGH-ACHIEVING AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

A Thesis in
Higher Education
by
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The purpose of this study was to understand how social sources of self-knowledge influence the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Previous research has examined what factors affect academic-self-concept of African American college students. Informed by grounded theory and phenomenological perspectives, this research sought to understand qualitatively how one set of these factors—the social world as a source of self-knowledge— influenced the academic self-concept of a specific population, high-achieving African American college students within the university context. Social sources of self-knowledge included the reflected appraisals of significant (e.g., particular individuals) and generalized others (e.g., society and culture) and social comparisons. The influence that racial identity had on academic self-concept was also explored.

To gain this understanding, 17 high-achieving African American college students were interviewed two times during Fall 2005. As participants were also part of an academic fellowship program, interviews with the fellowship program administrators and observations of many of the programmatic components were conducted in an effort to gain a richer understanding of the experiences of the participants and to increase the trustworthiness of the data. Systematic data analysis yielded a model of how social sources of self-knowledge influence the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a PWI.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.......................................................................................... viii

Chapter 1  Introduction ........................................................................................... 1
  Purpose ................................................................................................................. 6
  Research Question ............................................................................................... 6
  Significance ........................................................................................................... 7

Chapter 2  Literature Review .................................................................................. 9
  High-Achieving African American College Students ........................................... 11
  Definition of High-Achieving African American College Students .................. 12
  Characteristics of High-Achieving African American College Students .......... 13
  Theoretical Framework ......................................................................................... 16
  Self-Concept ......................................................................................................... 17
  Sources of Self-Knowledge ................................................................................... 19
  Reflected appraisal ............................................................................................... 21
  Significant others ............................................................................................... 22
  Generalized other ............................................................................................... 22
  Stereotype threat ................................................................................................. 23
  Stigma consciousness ......................................................................................... 24
  Social comparison theory .................................................................................... 25
  Academic Self-Concept ......................................................................................... 28
  Influences on Academic Self-Concept ................................................................ 31
  Type of institution ............................................................................................... 31
  Class standing ..................................................................................................... 32
  Gender ................................................................................................................ 33
  Significant others ............................................................................................... 34
  Racial identity ..................................................................................................... 36
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 41

Chapter 3  Research Design ................................................................................... 43
  Pilot Study ............................................................................................................ 44
  Preliminary Conceptual Framework ................................................................... 46
  Methodology ......................................................................................................... 48
  Context ................................................................................................................ 49
  Researcher as Context ........................................................................................ 50
  Pre-college experiences ....................................................................................... 51
  College experiences ............................................................................................. 54
  The three “R’s”: Racial identity, racial socialization, and racism ....................... 56
  Institution as Context .......................................................................................... 58
  Honors Programs as Context ............................................................................. 59
  Bunton-Waller Fellowship Program as Context ............................................... 61
Chapter 4  Findings......................................................................................................81

Participant Summaries..........................................................................................82
    Demographic Summary of Sophomore Participants .......................................82
    Demographic Summary of Senior Participants ..............................................83
Social World as an Influence on Academic Self-Concept....................................85
Pre-College Experiences......................................................................................87
    Pre-College Academic Self-Concept .................................................................87
    School Experiences ..........................................................................................89
    Organized sports .............................................................................................91
    Grades and honor classes ..............................................................................91
Social Comparison ...............................................................................................91
The Black Church .................................................................................................98
Proving Academic Competence ..........................................................................101
    “Talking White” ..........................................................................................103
Family Support and Sacrifice .............................................................................106
Academic Socialization ......................................................................................110
Racial Socialization ............................................................................................113
College Experiences ............................................................................................117
    College Academic Self-Concept .....................................................................119
Significant Others ..............................................................................................121
    Family..............................................................................................................121
    Pressure and responsibility ............................................................................121
    Support ..........................................................................................................123
Friends ..............................................................................................................125
    Support group with common goals ..............................................................125
Generalized Other ..............................................................................................128
    Stereotypes .....................................................................................................128
    Proving academic competence ......................................................................128
Fellowship Program (Being a Fellow) ................................................................136
    Refuge ............................................................................................................137
    Privilege .........................................................................................................139
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reference group</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Comparison</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade point average</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Identity</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Meaning</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Model</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-College Characteristics</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Self-Concept</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Identity</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Meaning</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sources of Self-Knowledge Influencing Academic Self-Concept</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant others: Family and friends</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalized other: Stereotypes and the Fellowship Program</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social comparison</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5 Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of the Study</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model of How the Social World Influences the Academic Self-Concept of High-Achieving African American College Students at a Predominantly White Institution</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-College Characteristics</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Self-Concept</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Identity</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Meaning</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sources of Self-Knowledge Influencing Academic Self-Concept</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant others: Family and friends</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalized other: Stereotypes and the Fellowship Program</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social comparison</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Research and Limitations</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A Preliminary Conceptual Framework of Social Influences on the Academic Self-Concept of High-Achieving African American College Students at a PWI</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B Recruitment Script</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C Participant Summary</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomores</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2001, 12.1% of undergraduate students in degree granting institutions were African American\(^1\) compared to 11% in 1996 and 11.6% in 1999 (National Center for Education Statistics). While the numbers of African American students have steadily increased over the years, African American undergraduate students consistently lag behind others in terms of academic achievement (Steele & Aronson, 1995). For example, in 1999-2000, only 7.3% and 7.5% of African American undergraduate students had grades of mostly A’s or A’s and B’s respectively, compared to 16.5% and 11.7% of Whites, 13.6% and 10.1% of Asians, 8.7% and 9.7% of Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 8.3% and 9.7% of American Indians (Undergraduate grade-point averages, 1999-2000). Although across races, the majority of students had C’s, D’s, or lower, African Americans still had the largest percentage of C’s and D’s and the smallest percentage in the A and B range.

While the low number of African American college students who are academically successful looks discouraging, there are African American students who excel academically. These academically successful students do not conform to the stereotype of underachieving African American students; they are in fact high-achieving. Researchers like Sedlacek (1999) contend that there are eight noncognitive variables that

\(^1\) In order to be true to the data and use the language used by participants, the terms African American and Black will be used interchangeably.
are significant in the lives of minority students that affect their success. In this case, noncognitive variables refer to variables that focus on “adjustment, motivation, and student perceptions” and are another means to evaluate students’ success, as opposed to “relying solely on the traditional verbal and quantitative (often called cognitive) areas typically measured by standardized tests” (Sedlacek, 2004, p. 7). Using these variables is not a means to substitute for other measures of success, but rather a way to “add to the range of attributes that we consider in making the many judgments” that we make about student success (Sedlacek, 2004, p. 7).

How well students are able to adjust in these various dimensions, as well as how faculty and staff encourage adjustment, will “determine the success or failure of the minority student” (Sedlacek, 1999, p. 538). The dimensions are realistic self-appraisal, understanding and dealing with racism, demonstrated community service, preference for long-range goals to short-term or immediate needs, availability of strong support persons, successful leadership experience, knowledge acquired in a field, and positive self-concept.

While each of these dimensions are important to African American students’ success and are viable areas of research, the proposed research will explore the dimension of self-concept. Broadly, self-concept is “a person’s perception of himself [sic]” (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976, p. 411). According to Sedlacek (1999), adjustment in this domain occurs when students “possess strong self-feeling, strength of character, determination, [and] independence” (p. 539). Sedlacek (2004) contends that for students of color and nontraditional students in higher education, having a positive self-concept predicts success in higher education. Although Sedlacek refers to self-
concept in the broadest of terms, this dimension is of particular interest to educators, researchers, and administrators in higher education because research shows that self-concept, specifically as it relates to academics, is correlated with academic achievement for African American students (Cokley, 2000, 2002a; Gerardi, 1990; Reynolds, 1988; Spaights, Kenner, & Dixon, 1986).

According to Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton (1976), self-concept is hierarchical, meaning that at the top of the hierarchy is the general self-concept comprised of non-academic self-concept and academic self-concept. Academic self-concept therefore is defined as how students view their academic ability compared to other students (Marsh, 1993). In other words, it is their perceptions of their academic abilities. In the field of education, “research suggests that the attainment of a positive academic self-concept affects academic behaviors, academic choices, educational aspirations, and subsequent academic achievement” (Marsh, 1993, p. 59). Given this relationship, it is important to explore further the academic self-concept of African American college students.

According to Cokley (2002b) “academic self-concept seems to be a useful construct to research in examining the psychosocial development of African American college students” (p. 296).

Studies show that academic achievement, as measured by grade point average (GPA), is positively related to academic self-concept in students (Cokley, 2000, 2002a; Gerardi, 1990; Reynolds, 1988; Spaights et al., 1986; Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997). In addition, for African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), GPA is the best predictor of academic self-concept (Cokley, 2000). Fisher (2000) found that academic self-concept was a construct, among others, that differentiated high
and low achieving adolescents, such that academic self-concept was the strongest predictor of academic achievement. Although research shows that African American students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) perform better academically compared to African American students at PWIs (Allen, 1992), the fact remains that the majority of African American students are educated at PWIs. Thus, it is worthwhile to study academically successful African American students at PWIs to not only ensure their continued academic success, but also assist those who may be underperforming.

While there is an abundance of literature on self-concept, much of the research on academic self-concept focuses on adolescents (Fisher, 2000; Witherspoon et al., 1997). There is limited research on college students’ academic self-concept in general (Reynolds, 1988) but few studies focus specifically on African Americans. Those studies that focus on the academic self-concept of African American college students are primarily quantitative (Cokley, 2000, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b; Cokley, Komarraju, King, Cunningham, & Muhammad, 2003). Although these quantitative studies identify what factors affect academic self-concept, they do not explore how it is influenced, nor do they take into consideration how students’ college experiences influence academic self-perceptions. While there is some research that focuses on the academic self-concept of high-achieving or gifted students, again, most of the focus is on adolescents (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Therefore, this research fills a void in the existing academic self-concept literature.

There is a body of research that examines predictors of academic self-concept for African American college students in general (Cokley, 2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003a;
Cokley et al., 2003) and a growing body of research that examines the characteristics of high-achieving African American college students and how they experience college (Ford, Harris II, Webb, & Jones, 1994; Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2002; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001, 2002; Harper, 2005; Hrabowski III, Maton, & Greif, 1998). Because of the relationship that exists between academic self-concept and academic achievement, we can infer that students with higher GPAs have a positive academic self-concept, although the causal ordering is not clear (Marsh, 1993). While separate bodies of research exist on academic self-concept and high-achieving African American college students, what is not clear, is how the social world, through social comparisons, racial identity, and the appraisals of others, influence the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students within the context of the university. Although this is a viable area of research, “very little attention has focused on identifying factors that contribute to students’ having a positive academic self-concept” (Cokley, 2003b, p. 529), therefore research should continue to examine the relationship that exists between influences on academic self-concept and college success for African American students, particularly high-achieving African American college students. This study filled the void in the existing literature on academic self-concept and high-achieving African American college students by exploring the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students and generating a model of how the social world influences academic self-concept.
Purpose

Research on academic self-concept examines various social influences on academic self-concept; however, these influences are often treated as isolated and unrelated. This research was guided by the premise that the self and the meaning one attaches to their self-definition and perception is socially constructed (James, 1968/1980), that is, the social world influences one’s self-concept. The purpose of this study was to explore and develop a model of how social sources of self-knowledge influence the academic self-perceptions of high-achieving African American college students at a PWI.

Academic self-concept is what a person thinks of his or her academic ability (Marsh, 1993). The high-achieving African American college students in this study were students who received an academic fellowship at a large, rural, predominantly White research university in the Northeast. Social sources of self-knowledge referred to factors in the social world in the context of a university setting that influenced the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students. Social sources of self-knowledge included social comparisons, racial identity, and the appraisals of others (e.g., society, friends, family).

Research Question

The following research question guided this study: How do social sources of self-knowledge influence, both positively and negatively, the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American students at a PWI? These social sources of self-knowledge included to whom high-achieving African American college students compared
themselves academically and how the appraisals of others influenced their academic self-concept. The appraisals of others came from significant others, such as family and friends, as well as from a generalized other, meaning society and culture. The role of racial identity, a component of self-concept, was also explored.

**Significance**

Few studies exist that specifically explore the academic self-concept of African American college students at PWIs, particularly as it relates to high-achieving African American college students. As stated previously, much of the research on academic self-concept is quantitative and explores the relationship between academic self-concept and factors such as institutional context, motivational factors, class standing, gender, significant others, and racial identity of African Americans at PWIs and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Previous research examined *what* factors affect academic-self-concept. This research sought to understand *how* the social world influences academic self-concept. In addition, previous studies did not explore the social comparison process nor did they focus specifically on a population that is often understudied, high-achieving African American college students.

While there is a body of literature that examines the experiences and psychosocial development of high-achieving African American students in colleges and universities, particularly PWIs, “much of what we know about gifted Black students in general comes from the work of scholars who study Black students in elementary, junior high, and high-school environments” (Fries-Britt, 1998, p. 557). In addition, much of the research that
exists about African American college students focuses on those students who are not academically achieving. While it is beneficial and useful to understand the needs of those students who are not achieving, it is also important to understand those students who are already successful academically. Understanding how factors contribute to their academic success by examining academic self-concept will provide invaluable insight to help possibly those who are not excelling academically. For these reasons, the current research focused on high-achieving African American college students. While high-achieving can be defined in a multitude of ways, for the purpose of this research, high-achieving students were those African American students who demonstrated academic excellence by their selection and participation in a fellowship program.

We need to understand better how the social world influences the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at PWIs. Little has been written about how academic self-concept is influenced for this population. Having this understanding might help decrease the achievement gap that exists for African American college students. The current research bridged the gap in the literature on the academic self-concept of African American college students and the research on the experiences of high-achieving African American college students at PWIs by using social psychological theories of the self to explore qualitatively how the social world influences academic self-concept.
This study explored the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Specifically, it explored how social comparisons, racial identity, and appraisals from the generalized other (i.e., society and culture), and significant others (i.e., family and friends) in the context of a university setting influenced the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students. Academic self-concept is what a student thinks of his or her academic ability compared to other students (Marsh, 1993). High-achieving African American college students were students who received an academic fellowship at a large, rural, predominantly White research university in the Northeast.

In the domain of academics, African American students often lag behind their White counterparts (Steele & Aronson, 1995). While the low numbers of African American students who are academically successful looks discouraging, there is a small number of African American students who are excelling academically. Researchers (Sedlacek, 1999) found that there are several non-cognitive variables/dimensions that are significant in the lives of minority students. How well students adjust and how well faculty and staff encourage adjustment in these various dimensions will “determine the success or failure of the minority student” (Sedlacek, 1999, p. 538). According to Sedlacek, the variables are realistic self-appraisal, understanding and dealing with racism, demonstrated community service, preference for long-range goals to short-term or
immediate needs, availability of strong support persons, successful leadership experience,
knowledge acquired in a field, and positive self-concept. In this instance, noncognitive
refers to variables that focus on “adjustment, motivation, and student perceptions” and
are another means to evaluate students success, as opposed to “relying solely on the
traditional verbal and quantitative (often called cognitive) areas typically measured by
standardized tests” (Sedlacek, 2004, p. 7).

The current research examined the non-cognitive variable of self-concept, more
specifically, academic self-concept. Self-concept refers to one’s self-perception (Marsh,
1990) and academic self-concept refers to one’s perception of his or her academic ability
(Marsh, 1993). In order to gain this perception, people rely on the social world to give
them information. This information often comes in the form of the appraisals of others.
People also often compare themselves to others in order to get a sense of who they are.
Using the appraisals of others and comparing oneself to others are two ways in which
people can gain knowledge, not only about who they are, but also about who they are
academically.

According to Sedlacek (1999), adjustment in the dimension of self-concept occurs
when students “possess strong self-feeling, strength of character, determination, [and]
independence” (p. 539). One way to examine what leads to academic success is to
examine a noncognitive factor such as academic self-concept. Researchers have found a
relationship between academic performance and academic self-concept for African
American students at PWIs, (Cokley, 2000, 2002b) suggesting that those students who
are academically successful also have positive self-concepts.
Much of the research on academic self-perception focuses on adolescents and does not specifically focus on African American adolescents. Those studies that do focus on African American college students examine predictors of academic self-concept as isolated factors and do not explain how the factors interrelate. In addition, existing research on academic self-concept does not specifically study high-achieving African American college students and their academic self-perceptions. Researchers have examined how high-achieving African American college students experience college, the characteristics of high-achieving African American college students, and predictors of academic self-concept for African American college students in general. What is not clear is how social sources of self-knowledge influence high-achieving African American college students’ perceptions of their academic abilities.

This review consists of three main sections, beginning with a discussion of high-achieving African American college students (to define the population this study examines), followed by a discussion on the theoretical framework that informed the study, with specific attention paid to those theories related to the development of a self-concept – the reflected appraisal and social comparison process. The chapter concludes with a review of the relevant literature of the influences on academic self-concept for African American college students.

**High-Achieving African American College Students**

To gain a better understanding of the population studied, it is important to have a working definition of high-achieving African American college students. This definition
informed the study and offered parameters in selecting a sample and reviewing relevant literature. It is also important to understand the characteristics of high-achieving African American college students at predominantly White institutions, as this research was conducted at a PWI. This will offer insight into how these students experience college and what helps and hinders their academic success. Knowing the needs and experiences of high-achieving African American college students provides a context for studying their academic self-concept.

**Definition of High-Achieving African American College Students**

The majority of research on high achievers in general centers on adolescents, using the term gifted to identify these students. Currently, there is not consensus on the definition of gifted. Traditionally it has been based on high IQ test scores (130+) or high scores on achievement tests (90th percentile) (Ford, 1996). Others (Marland, 1970 cited in Ford, 1996) have identified six areas of giftedness: “general intellectual, specific academic, creative or productive thinking, leadership, visual and performing arts, and psychometer” (p. 9). In examining African American achievers specifically, some define African American achievers as students who have accomplished a task or tasks and who are intrinsically motivated (Ford, 1996).

In terms of African American college students, some define high-achieving African American college students as students who not only demonstrate academic achievement in the classroom, but are also leaders and actively engaged in out of class activities (Harper, 2005). Much of the research on high-achieving African American
college students defines high achievers as students who participate in race-based merit or honors programs or who maintain a certain grade point average (GPA) (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Freeman, 1999; Fries-Britt, 1998; Hrabowski III et al., 1998).

Using a similar definition of high-achieving African American college students as Fries-Britt (1998) this study defined high achievers as those African American students who received an academic fellowship that requires a minimum overall GPA of 3.0 for upper class students and 2.75 for first-year students. Students are recruited to the program in a number of ways, but must all meet minimum academic specifications as determined by the university in order to receive the fellowship and be part of the fellowship program.

### Characteristics of High-Achieving African American College Students

Though small, there is a growing body of literature that focuses on the experiences of high-achieving African American collegians at PWIs and HBCUs. Based on a review of the literature, several themes emerged as relevant to this population. Studies show that high-achieving African American college students experience isolation at PWIs (Bird, 1996; Davis et al., 2004; Feagin et al., 1996; Fries-Britt, 1998, 2002). Isolation can be reduced by interacting with other high-achieving African American college students both socially and academically (Fries-Britt, 1998; Tatum, 1997; Willie, 2003).

In addition, high-achieving African American college students feel as though they have to prove to Whites at the university that they deserve to be there, as many Whites think they are admitted solely because they are Black (Davis et al., 2004; Feagin et al., 1996).
The support of peers and the importance of interacting with other Blacks who share their academic endeavors, as well as those who may not be as academically successful, is important (Feagin et al., 1996). These students also speak of the importance of family in their lives and differences in family environment as accounting for variation in school performance (Hrabowski III et al., 1998; O'Connor, 2002).

While high-achieving African American college students may have positive academic self-concepts, there are sometimes conflicts that arise between their academic self-concept and their social self-concept, specifically, their racial identity (Ford, 1996; Ford et al., 1994; Fries-Britt, 2000; Tatum, 1997). Reconciling and balancing racial identity and a positive academic self-concept can be challenging in general, but this conflict appears to affect high achievers more than those African American students who are underperforming, as they are performing counter to the underachievement stereotype most often associated with African Americans. As a result of this conflict, high achievers may hide their academic ability in order to fit in with their African American peers (Feagin et al., 1996; Ford, 1996; Ogbu, 1990; Tatum, 1997).

In a study of Black adolescents in a poor Black community, Fordham (1996) found that in an effort to achieve Blacks took on the attitude, behavior, and characteristics not typically associated with Blacks. Most of the students interviewed had a commitment to the dominant society’s values, resisting the pull to identify too strongly with the Black community. “Black adolescents consciously and unconsciously sense that they have to give up aspects of their identities and of their indigenous cultural system in order to
achieve success as defined in dominant-group terms; their reality resulting social selves are embedded in the notion of racelessness” (Fordham, 1988, p. 82).

Tatum (1997) offers another perspective to the notion of racelessness. She states that students can still achieve academically while maintaining their racial identity. “Students can “play down Black identity in order to succeed in school and mainstream institutions without rejecting his [sic] Black identity. Instead of becoming raceless, an achieving Black student can become an emissary, someone who seeks his or her own achievements as advancing the cause of the racial group” (p. 64). This can possibly be achieved by students seeing themselves as part of the whole Black community and their achievements reflecting positively not only on them but also on the entire Black community. In other words, as he or she advances, so does the Black race.

One central question, according to Tatum, in considering the notion of racelessness and being an emissary is how academic achievement came to be defined as exclusively White. According to Ford, Harris, Webb, & Jones (1994), schools have traditionally “perpetuated racelessness through, for instance, the exclusive appreciation and teaching of white culture” (Ford et al., 1994, p. 19). Many argue for a curriculum that perpetuates the Great Books, teaching of the Western canon, or a traditional curriculum (Bloom, 1987). If one is to agree with Fordham and Tatum, this curriculum hinders the development of Black student identity and forces them to adapt to the dominant White culture, to detrimental effects. In order to remedy this, one could argue for curricular transformation that takes into consideration the diverse cultures that traditionally are not represented and of those who are marginalized (hooks, 1994).
While some argue against the fact that Blacks cannot be high achievers unless they “take on characteristics of the dominant culture and alienate those who value the Black culture” (Ford et al., 1994, p. 21), others suggest a strategy of biculturalism by “code switching” (Exum & Colangelo, 1981, cited in Ford et al., 1994). This involves adapting behavior, speech, and dress depending on the situation. Ford and her colleagues argue that many of the subjects interviewed in Fordham’s study were not raceless because they did, in fact, acknowledge and accept their Blackness.

Many define high-achieving African American college students differently. Some focus on grade point average, others focus on experiences outside the classroom, and still others base their definition on students participating in scholarship programs. Although these students may be academically successful, there are still areas in which they might struggle, such as experiencing isolation, proving their academic abilities, and managing their academic self-concept and racial identity.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study was informed by social psychological theories that influence the development of a self-concept. According to social psychological theories, people get a sense of who they are from the social world in which they live. What we think of ourselves is often based upon what we think others think of us. We also get a sense of who we are by comparing ourselves to others (Brown, 1998).

Others serve as a mirror in which we see ourselves reflected, we then appraise ourselves based on what we see reflected, thus forming a self-concept. These reflected
appraisals can come from particular ("significant") others. They also come from the
society and culture into which a person is born and lives and are referred to as the
"generalized other". (Cooley, 1902/1998; Mead, 1934).

In order to gain knowledge about themselves, people compare themselves to
comparison theory also offers a useful lens to understand not only to whom students
compare themselves, but how these comparisons influence self-concept. These
comparisons occur in the context of a social environment and can influence self-concept
as seen in the big fish little pond effect (BFLPE) (Marsh, 1990). The BFLPE occurs
when students compare their academic ability to students in their reference group, such
that students have "lower academic self-concepts when they compare themselves to more
able students, and higher academic self-concepts when they compare themselves with
less able students" (Marsh, 1990, p. 124).

Self-Concept

Self-concept research has been plagued with problems relating to its definition,
measurement, and interpretation (Shavelson et al., 1976). In research, the term self-
concept is often vaguely defined or used interchangeable with terms such as self-efficacy
or self-esteem, making a synthesis of research on self-concept difficult. "This
agglomerate use of general self-concept is dubious, and probably has led to many of the
contradictory findings which abound in self-concept research" (Marsh, 1990, p. 94).
Therefore, this review focuses specifically on research pertaining to self-concept, not self-esteem nor self-efficacy.

Broadly, self-concept is “a person’s perception of himself [sic]” (Shavelson et al., 1976, p. 411). Closely related, but distinct, are the constructs of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Self-esteem refers to how people feel about themselves. Self-efficacy refers to “beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (Bandura, 1997, p. 2). For the purpose of this study, I focus on research relating to self-concept narrowly defined as the way a person perceives him or herself (Brown, 1998).

While there have been many conceptualizations of self-concept, this study used that of Shavelson et al (1976) which views self-concept as hierarchical. This means that “facets of self-concept may form a hierarchy from individual experiences in particular situations at the base of the hierarchy to general self-concept at the apex” (p. 412). General self-concept consists of the non-academic self-concept and the academic self-concept. Non-academic self-concept is comprised of social self-concept (relations with peers and significant others and may include other social identities, such as racial identity), emotional self-concept (particular emotional states), and physical self-concept (physical ability and physical appearance). Academic self-concept refers to persons perceptions of their academic abilities.

According to Cokley et al. (2003), there are two differing perspectives in viewing academic self-concept. The first perspective asserts that like general self-concept, academic self-concept is also hierarchical and multidimensional, based on specific subjects (Marsh, 1990, 1993; Shavelson et al., 1976). For example, there may be English
self-concept and mathematics self-concept. The second perspective views academic self-
concept unidimensionally, such that academic achievement is influenced more by the
broad notion of the academic self-concept, often measured by overall GPA (Cokley,
2000; Lent, Brown, & Gore, 1997; Reynolds, 1988). These researchers measure academic
self-concept broadly using overall academic achievement, as opposed to examining
subject specific perceptions.

While both positions are beneficial, and academic self-concept may be subject
specific, it is still useful to have an understanding of how students feel generally about
their academic abilities (Cokley et al., 2003), because studies have shown that there is a
relationship between the general academic self-concept and overall academic
achievement (Cokley, 2000; Reynolds, 1988). Further overall academic performance is
associated with other outcomes such as persistence to graduation (Pascarella & Terenzini,
2005). For the purpose of this study, I therefore focus on the broad conception of
students’ academic self-concept.

**Sources of Self-Knowledge**

There are several sources of self-knowledge or ways that people learn about
themselves that affect self-concept. According to Brown (1998), people consult three
sources of information that affect self-concept. They are the inner or psychological world,
the physical world, and the social world.

In consulting the inner world, people may look inward at themselves and
“examine their behavior in the context in which it occurs and draw an appropriate
inference” (Brown, p. 61) to learn about themselves. For example, people may use introspection by looking inward and consulting “attitudes, feelings, and motives” (Brown, p. 58)

The physical world can also serve as a source of self-knowledge. For example, people can measure their height in feet and inches. In this case, people can measure their physical height. While consulting the physical world to gain self-knowledge is useful, it is not often the information that people are after (Brown, 1998). However, if people want to know if they are tall or short, they must consult the social world, as meaning is acquired only relative to others.

The third source of self-knowledge that people consult in order to gain knowledge about what they are like and who they are is the social world. In consulting the social world, people gain knowledge about where they stand in relationship to others. In other words, attributes “acquire meaning only with respect to the attributes of others” (Brown, p. 54). Thus, what people think of themselves is based on comparison. People must rely on other sources, such as the social world to provide information about what they are like and who they are. While people may use all or a combination of the three sources of information to gain knowledge about themselves, the current study examines specifically how the social world serves as a source of self-knowledge for the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students.

Within the social world, two processes are important in gaining self-knowledge. They are the reflected appraisals of others and social comparison (Brown, 1998). These two theories serve as a lens to understand how social influences, such as particular
individuals and society influence the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students.

Reflected appraisal

The self is a social structure and arises from social experiences (Mead, 1934). Cooley (1902/1998) is first credited with developing the idea of a “looking glass self”. According to this concept, other people serve as a mirror in which we see ourselves reflected, we then appraise ourselves based on what we see reflected. These reflected appraisals are a source of self-knowledge. “A self idea of this sort seems to have three principle elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (Cooley, 1902/1998, p. 164). For example, person A makes an appraisal of person B. Person B perceives what person A thinks of him or her. From this perception, person B then appraises himself or herself. It from the perceptions of person A that person B’s self-concept is then developed and affected.

Mead (1934) extended the notion of the looking glass self and reflected appraisals to not only include a particular, or a significant other, but to include the generalized other, meaning the society and culture in which one lives.

If the given human individual is to develop a self in the fullest sense…he [sic] must also, in the same way that he takes the attitudes of other individuals toward himself and toward one another takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized, co-operative social activity or set of such activities in which that group as such is engaged, does he develop a complete self or possess the sort of complete self he has developed (pp. 154-155).
In other words, the self is only truly developed when a person can take the attitude of society and culture (generalized other) and particular individuals (significant other).

Significant others

In terms of academic self-concept, reflected appraisals come from a variety of sources, such as family, friends, classmates, and faculty and can be positive or negative. For example, appraisals can come from an encouraging and supportive (or non-supportive) parent or friend. For high-achieving African American college students, having a supportive peer group consisting of other high-achieving African American college students and supportive faculty are important for their success (Fries-Britt, 1998, 2000). The appraisals from particular individuals can also have the opposite effect. Such that if a person sees himself or herself reflected by a particular other negatively or in the case of this study as a non-achiever, the person may also begin to think of himself or herself in the same manner.

Generalized other

What the society and culture in which a person lives communicates also affects academic self-concept, particularly for people who have been historically stigmatized. The generalized other can take the form of the appraisals a group of individuals (i.e., one’s peers) it can also take the form of stereotypes, which are a reflection of the generalized other. Two theories that examine the reflected appraisals of others,
particularly, the generalized other (as stereotypes are a reflection of the generalized other) are stereotype threat and stigma consciousness. Stereotype threat is “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (Steele, 1999, p. 46). Stigma consciousness refers to the extent to which individuals focus on their stereotyped status and believe it pervades their experiences (Pinel, 1999).

*Stereotype threat*

Stereotype threat affects people who identify with a domain and in this case, the domain is academics. Because students identify with academics, they are also often academically successful. The theory proposes that a test of diagnostic ability combined with a stereotype cause a threat that, in turn, causes an individual’s performance to decrease. Performance decrease is possibly the result of several factors, such as anxiety, evaluation apprehension, or frustration (Steele, 1997).

In the domain of academics, one possible negative effect of stereotype threat is disidentification, “the psychological disengagement from achievement hypothesized to help students cope with stereotype threat and underperformance in a given domain” (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002, p. 114). Long term, disidentification can affect individuals such that they no longer value the threatened domain and as such, it is no longer a part of their self-identity. With academics, it is implied that academic self-concept is low because academics is no longer a part of the person’s self-concept.
When the domain is academics, the psychological relief disidentification brings can be a very high price to pay (Steele, 1999), leading to lower academic performance and possibly resulting in decreased persistence to graduation. To combat disidentification, Steele and his colleagues propose “wise schooling”. Wise schooling calls for situational changes in school design such that students will not believe that they are held under the suspicion of negative stereotypes about their group (Steele, 1992, 1997, 1999). This theory was tested primarily with African American students at an Ivy League institution. These students can be considered high-achieving and are domain identified with academics therefore; it is particularly relevant to the current study of high-achieving African American college students.

Stigma consciousness

Another theory that examines the effects of stereotypes on people is stigma consciousness (Pinel, 1999). People high in stigma consciousness believe that stereotypes about their group permeate their interactions with outgroup members and that they cannot escape their stereotyped status. Those low in stigma consciousness are aware of their stereotyped status but do not believe it plays a role in their life experiences.

In contrast to stereotype threat, in which an individual is concerned with one’s own behavior in confirming a stereotype, stigma consciousness refers to the expectation that one will be stereotyped, regardless of one's behavior (Pinel, 1999). Increases in levels of stigma consciousness for African American and Latino students upon arriving at PWIs, resulting in different outcomes based on gender (Pinel, Warner, & Chua, 2005).
For males, increases in stigma consciousness predicted lower academic performance and increased disengagement from academics. For females, self-esteem suffered and those with low increases in stigma consciousness disengaged. In addition, researchers found that for females, academic performance was low regardless of changes in stigma consciousness.

Stigma consciousness and stereotype threat are useful theories in explaining differences in the academic performance of African American students based on the reflected appraisals of a generalized other in the form of stereotypes. However, they do not specifically examine how the reflected appraisals of the generalized other in the form of stereotypes influence the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students. The current research posits such a theory.

**Social comparison theory**

Social comparison theory offers a lens to understand better not only to whom students compare themselves, but how these comparisons influence self-concept. The original theory of social comparison by Festinger (1954/1989) states that people have a desire to know what they are like. To obtain this knowledge, people compare themselves to others who are similar to them. Recent evidence concludes that people may not only compare themselves to people who are similar, but also to others who they believe are slightly better off than they are through upward comparisons (Collins, 1996) or worse off than they are through downward comparisons (S. E. Taylor & Lobel, 1989).
Who people compare themselves to, whether it is upward or downward affects self-concept. In his review of the literature on the self-concept, Marsh (1990) discusses an effect that results from social comparisons called the Big Fish Little Pond Effect (BFLPE). The frame of reference model underlying the big-fish-little-pond effect (BFLPE) hypothesizes that students compare their own academic ability with the academic abilities of other students in their reference group. They then use this relativistic impression as one basis for forming their own academic self-concept. The BFLPE occurs when equally able students have lower academic self-concepts when they compare themselves to more able students, and higher academic self-concepts when they compare themselves with less able students (Marsh, 1990, p. 124).

Students’ academic self-perceptions are influenced and based on comparisons of the academic ability of students in the immediate context (Marsh, 1990). The same objective criteria may lead to differing academic self-concepts, leading one to believe that “the self-concept is responsive, then, to changes in the social context, which again suggests that the social environment imposes comparisons that have an impact on the individual” (Wood, 1989, p. 233). If students compare themselves to other academically talented students, such as the participants in the current research in the Fellowship Program, they will have a lower self-concept. This indicates that years in the fellowship program could undermine academic self-concept.

The BFLPE has been tested primarily on high school-aged adolescents, and focuses more on the macro level of school-average achievement, such that, “academic self-concept will be correlated positively with individual achievement but negatively related to school-average achievement” (p. 124). However, it can serve as a means for
understanding the social comparison process that occurs in a group of high ability college students. While the “BFLPE is based on the assumption that the mean ability levels of other students in the reference group—a generalized other—serves as a standard of comparison….Further research is needed to clarify whether specific other, an implicit generalized other, or both provide standards of comparisons” (Marsh, 1990, p. 133). As such, the current study not only examined the social comparison process of high-achieving African American college students as it relates to academic self-concept, but also the reflected appraisal process.

This research explored how the reflected appraisals from the generalized and significant other affected the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a PWI. According to Cooley (1902/1998) and Mead (1934), we infer self-views from our experience with others and we infer who we are from our social context. Along these lines, there are social influences on the self; in other words, we act differently in different social settings (Turner & Onorato, 1999). The context influences what aspects of our selves become salient. According to James’ classic work on the self (1968/1980), “a man [sic] has many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind…we may say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups” (p. 42). According to this belief, a sense of self is dependent on the context of a situation and the reflected appraisals of others. These appraisals come from the significant or generalized other. Keeping in mind that it is what we think other people think of us, not what may be actually true. In addition, for the views of the other to be relevant to the self, the domain,
or area under consideration, must be salient to the individual. While there is not a theory that applies specifically to high-achieving African American college students, an understanding of the reflected appraisal and social comparison process can be applied to aid in the understanding of how academic self-concept is influenced within the university context.

**Academic Self-Concept**

Theories about social influences on self-knowledge provide a lens for studying the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students. These theories hold that the self is socially constructed and influenced by particular others, such as peers and family, and generalized others, society and culture (Mead, 1934). Research has demonstrated quantitatively what factors affect African American students’ perceptions of their academic abilities (e.g., attending a PWI, racial identity) and qualitatively what factors influence how high-achieving African American college students experience college (e.g., support of family and peers). Research has not thoroughly qualitatively examined how the social world helps and/or hinders high-achieving African American college students’ perceptions of their academic abilities. This study therefore fills a void in the literature by exploring how social sources of self-knowledge within a university context influence the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a PWI and generating a model of how academic self-concept is influenced by the social world.
Because there is limited research on the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students, the reviewed literature focuses on the academic self-concept of African Americans in general. Broadly conceptualized academic self-concept is, “how a student views his or her academic ability when compared with other students” (Cokley, 2000, p. 149) or one’s perceptions of their academic ability. To be academically successful, individuals must identify with the domain of academics. Academics must be a part of their self-concept; more specifically, they must have a positive academic self-concept. Previous research suggests that there is a positive relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement as measured by grade point average (GPA) (Cokley, 2000, 2002a; Gerardi, 1990; Reynolds, 1988; Spaights et al., 1986; Witherspoon et al., 1997).

In the classic study that validated the Academic Self-Concept Scale (ASCS), Reynolds (1988) found that academic self-concept was positively significantly related to GPA, that participants with more internal locus of control had higher academic self-concepts, and that there was a stronger relationship between academic self-concept and GPA after the freshman year. Participants were 589 undergraduate students from three colleges in New York State. While this study offers an early measure of academic self-concept that many recent studies use, the study provides little information about the colleges in the study and does not include a copy of the measure.

Consistent with these results, Gerardi (1990), in a study of 98 first-year engineering students at CUNY, found that academic self-concept was the best predictor of academic success as measured by GPA in minority and low socioeconomic status college students. Specifically, self-concept of ability better predicted academic success.
than cognitive variables such as college skills assessment examinations and high school GPA. Academic self-concept was measured with the Brookover Self-Concept of Ability Scale (SCA).

Spaights et al. (1986) examined the relationship between self-concept and academic performance, and the successful matriculation and retention of African American students at PWIs. Participants were 37 male and 81 female African American students at three universities in the University of Wisconsin system who were administered the Tennessee self-concept scale. Academic performance was measured by GPA and retention was measured by the number of semesters enrolled. Researchers found no significant relationship between self-concept and GPA, but for females, as self-concept increased, GPA increased. While these findings are useful, it is important to note that the researchers used a global measure of self-concept, as opposed to measuring academic self-concept, which could account for the results.

While the causal ordering of the correlation between academic self-concept and academic achievement is debatable (Marsh, 1993), researchers have found that a relationship exists. This relationship suggests that academically successful students (or high-achieving African American college students) have a positive or high academic self-concept. Because academic self-concept is socially constructed, it is influenced by the social comparison process, as well as, by the reflected appraisals of significant others and the generalized other. This research sought to understand how these social sources of self-knowledge influenced the academic self-perceptions of high-achieving African American college students at a PWI.
Influences on Academic Self-Concept

Although the current body of literature on academic self-concept and African American college students is small, research indicates several factors influence the academic self-concept of African American students. The existing literature on influences on academic self-concept falls into several categories, including type of institution, class standing, gender, significant others, and racial identity. Unlike the current study, the reviewed studies measure academic self-concept quantitatively and do not explain how the factors influence academic self-concept, nor do the studies focus specifically on high-achieving African American college students.

While there is a study that attempted to establish an initial model “of factors and processes that contribute to African American college students’ academic self-concept”, this model used attribution and motivation theories as a framework (Cokley, 2003b, p. 549). The sample included 687 students from three public colleges PWIs and HBCUs in the Midwest and South over a three-year period. In developing this model of academic motivation, the researcher used 396 African American students.

Type of institution

Research indicates that a relationship exists between academic self-concept and type of institution (HBCU or PWI). The effect of attending an HBCU and a PWI on academic self-concept for African American college students has been examined, showing that institutional context, or type of institution, affects students perceptions of academic ability (Cokley, 2003b).
Studies indicate (Cokley, 2000, 2002b) that the best predictor of academic self-concept for students at PWIs is GPA, while the best predictor of academic self-concept for students at HBCUs was quality of student-faculty interactions. Cokley also concluded that GPA was significantly more important for the academic self-concepts of African Americans at PWIs than for African Americans at HBCUs.

In her classic work on Black college students, Fleming (1984) found that African American men at PWIs have a lower academic self-concept and suffer from more academic demotivation and interpersonal issues than African American men at HBCUs. Fleming also found that HBCUs “promote more positive growth in academic functioning and intellectual self-concept” than PWIs (p. 80). Not only are there differences in academic self-concept based on institutional type, but African American students at HBCUs have higher GPAs than those at PWIs (Allen, 1992; Cokley, 2000; Sellers, Chavous, & Cooke, 1998), which means that institutional type has a bearing on academic performance which can have implications for student success, persistence, and future opportunities after college.

**Class standing**

Reynolds (1988) hypothesizes that GPA and academic self-concept will be higher in upper class college students. This is because students with poor grades and adjustment will have dropped out of school. In addition, it is usually the case that during their freshman and sophomore years, students try out different academic majors, switching when they lose interest, or as may be more commonly the reason, they meet academic failure. These processes, as well as a general maturation factor, should
Contribute to a linear increase in academic self-concept by year in college. (p. 279)

Contrary to Reynolds (1988) who found relationships between academic persistence and academic self-perceptions, Spaights, et al. (1986) found no significant relationship between self-concept and the number of semesters enrolled in college for Black students. Cokley (2000) found that class standing was a significant predictor of academic self-concept for students at HBCUs but not at PWIs and that lower class students had higher academic self-concepts than upper class students, but this was not significant. Consistent with this finding, in a replication study, Cokley (2002a), using a cross-section of first-year students to seniors from two HBCUs and two PWIs, found that there was a decrease in the amount and significance of the correlation between academic self-concept and GPA for upper class African American males, but not females. In other words, underclass African American male and female students and upper class female students were identified with academics (as measured by the significant relationship between academic self-concept and GPA).

**Gender**

Research on gender differences in academic self-concept yield contradictory findings and vary according to institutional type. For example, Fleming (1984) found that African American men at PWIs have lower academic self-concept, suffer from greater academic demotivation and report more interpersonal issues than African American men at HBCUs. Fleming also found that African American women at HBCUs and PWIs have more anxiety about their academic abilities, but show stronger gains in intellectual self-
confidence when at an HBCU. Consistent with this finding, Allen (1992), examined the experiences of Black students at HBCUs and PWIs and found that overall African American women had higher self-confidence than African American men.

On the other hand, Reynolds (1988) found no statistically significant differences between men and women in academic self-concept. Consistent with Reynolds, Cokley (2000) found no gender differences in academic self-concept. These contradictory results may be due to the various measures used to assess academic self-concept. Both Cokley and Reynolds measured academic self-concept using the Academic Self-Confidence Scale developed by Reynolds. Allen assessed self-confidence broadly by asking participants to indicate how an unbiased observer would rate them relative to other students at the university on their self-confidence, leadership ability, and the kind of person they think they are. Fleming used numerous measures to evaluate the college experience and specifically examined self-concept using an adjective checklist divided into five clusters: social decorum, incompetence, ambition, fatigue, and extra/introversion. Because Allen and Fleming’s measures were vague and not specifically related to academic self-concept, it is feasible that their results would be different from those studies using a measure that specifically examine academic self-concept.

**Significant others**

Significant others, such as peers, family, and teachers, may influence the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students (Johnsen &
Medley, 1978). In a study that examined academic self-concept of Black high school seniors and the agreement on academic self-concept with significant others as perceived by the student, researchers found that all students had strong academic self-concept (Johnsen & Medley, 1978). In addition, there were no differences when controlling for sex, and mothers were the most important significant other (using strength of agreement). Significant relationships were found for siblings, grandparents, friends, and teachers.

While this is one article that uses reflected appraisals as a framework, it is relatively old and the authors admittedly use the term self-concept to encompass self-esteem and self-concept.

Recent studies have found a relationship between significant others and academics. For example, in a study of African American high school students in an Upward Bound program, Witherspoon et al. (1997) found that 90% of the participants said that family members encouraged their academic activities and 5% said that family members did not. In addition, 46% of the participants indicated that friends encouraged their academic activities, while 31% indicated that friends were not encouraging. “When individuals see themselves as academically and intellectually capable students, and when this idea is reinforced by teachers and family” it is believed that they will be more likely to want to perform academically well (Cokley, 2003b).

In his study on the motivation of African American college students, Cokley (2003b) found that the perceptions of faculty encouragement was a significant predictor of academic self-concept, more for African American students at HBCUs than PWIs. Based on a review of the literature, Fisher (2000) identified several constructs that differentiate high and low academic achieving Black adolescents, such as support from
significant others such as parents, teachers, and peers. In addition, as discussed previously, family and peers play a vital role in the academic success of high-achieving African American college students (Fries-Britt, 2002; Hrabowski III et al., 1998).

**Racial identity**

Literature suggests that a relationship exists between academic self-concept and social self-concept, specifically, racial identity (Ford et al., 1994). Broadly conceptualized, racial identity is the significance a person places on their race, as well as, their attitudes and beliefs about their race (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). There are several models of racial identity, but most fall in one of two categories, stage or structural models.

Stage models are developmental in nature, with an inherent assumption that identity progresses toward an implied ideal identity. One of the most widely recognized models of racial identity development for African Americans is Cross’ Model of Psychological Nigrescence (Cross, 1995), which describes the process of moving from a non-Afrocentric identity (characterized by low racial salience to race neutral to anti-Black views) to an Afrocentric identity (characterized by the translation of a personal sense of Blackness into a plan of action or a general sense of commitment).

Structural models are descriptive in nature and describe the various components of racial identity. There is no end state, progression, or “goal” identity implied. These models do not place value on whether an identity is psychologically healthy or unhealthy. The focus is on describing racial identity at a specific point in time and not on
individuals’ racial identity development. One such model is the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) (Sellers et al., 1997). According to the MMRI, racial identity is the significance and meaning that individuals attribute to being Black in their conceptualization of self. There are three underlying assumptions, first, “identities are stable properties of the person but can be influenced by situations” (Marks, Settles, Cooke, Morgan, & Sellers, 2004, p. 397); second, individuals have different identities that vary in level of importance; and third, “the individual’s perception of what it means to be Black is the most valid indicator of racial identity” (p. 397).

According to the MMRI, racial identity is comprised of four dimensions. Racial centrality refers to whether race is a core part of an individual’s self-concept over time. It is essentially group identification. Salience refers to whether race is part of an individual’s self-concept at a particular time and can be influenced by situations. Racial ideology is the beliefs, opinions, and attitudes about how a Black person should live and interact with society. These fall into four categories. They are nationalist (stresses uniqueness of being of African Descent), oppressed minority (stresses similarities between African Americans and other minorities), assimilationist (stresses similarities between African Americans and American mainstream society), and humanist (stresses commonalities of all humans). The fourth dimension, racial regard refers to affective and evaluative judgments made of a person’s race. This falls in two categories, private and public regard. Private regard refers to the affective and evaluative judgments you make of African Americans, or what you think about African Americans. Public regard refers to your beliefs about other’s affective and evaluative judgments of African Americans, or what you think others think of African Americans. These authors argue that all
components of racial identity, not just racial centrality, might impact perceived discrimination. MMRI is measured with the Multi-Dimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI). It measures the three stable dimensions of MMRI – centrality, ideology, and regard.

People often receive messages about what it means to be their race and about racism early in life, most often from parents or family members. These messages can have effect on subsequent racial identity. Racial socialization refers to the messages that African American adolescents received messages when growing up about managing racism, cultural pride, and spirituality from their primary caregiver (Stevenson, Cameron, Herrero-Taylor, & Davis, 2002). This is often measured quantitatively by the Teenager Racial Socializations Scale (TERS). The measure has five factors: cultural coping with antagonism (CCA), cultural pride reinforcement (CPR), cultural appreciation of legacy (CLA), cultural alertness to discrimination (CAD), and cultural endorsement of the mainstream (CEM).

In a study that examined gender differences in the psychosocial development of male and female college students at two HBCUs, Cokley (2001) found that there were significant differences in racial centrality (the significance of racial identity in their life) based on respondent’s gender. The researcher found that for females, racial centrality was positively significantly related to academic self-concept, but for males, there was no significant relationship.

In another study, Okech and Harrington (2002) examined the relationship between Black consciousness (African Americans’ beliefs about their own race and the White majority), self-esteem, and academic self-efficacy of 120 African American men at
a predominantly African American university. These researchers found significant positive relationships between Black consciousness and academic self-efficacy and between Black consciousness and self-esteem. The authors cite as a limitation to the study that all participants were in the later stages of Black consciousness, thus there is no information about those students who are in the earlier stages of Black consciousness and the relationship between academic self-concept. In addition, no mediators were discussed or identified and the researchers used measures of academic self-efficacy relating to specific tasks such as memorization, class concentration, understanding, and note taking, as opposed to a global measure of academic self-concept. Researchers concluded that interventions to improve academic performance of Black men should take place at the academic self-efficacy level and not at the self-esteem level.

In another study that examined the relationship between academic self-concept, self-esteem, racial identity, and academic achievement in African American high school students, researchers found that academic-self-concept and immersion racial identity attitudes best predicted GPA (Witherspoon et al., 1997). Immersion racial identity attitudes are characterized by total immersion in “Blackness”, rage at White people and culture, guilt at having been tricked into thinking Negro ideas, and a developing sense of pride in one’s Black self, in Black people, and Black culture (Cross, 1995).

Researchers (Ford et al., 1994) have also examined the academic and social self-concepts of high-achieving African American college students. Using Cross’ theory of racial identity development as a framework, researchers state that during the encounter stage, Black students’ academic self-concept takes precedence over their social-self concept as a Black person (Ford, 1996). In applying this theory to high-achieving Black
students, students in this stage prefer to be viewed as a human being versus a Black person and as a “good student” versus a “good Black student” (Ford et al., 1994). During the encounter stage gifted students at predominantly White institutions experience a “conflict between academic and social self-concepts” (Ford, 1996, p. 105). This is usually the result of rejection by White peers and/or White teachers. Black students begin to believe “cultural stereotypes” which often do not include academic achievement. This academic achievement is associated with being White (Tatum, 1997). During the encounter stage of racial identity, academic performance declines because the “search for identity leads toward cultural identity and away from anything that might be associated with Whiteness and doing well in school becomes identified as trying to be White. Being smart becomes the opposite of being cool” (Tatum, 1997, p. 62).

Students cling to “all things Black” during the immersion-emersion stage. Students may underachieve “to avoid the perception of ‘selling out’ to the White community” (Ford, 1996, p. 105). The student may become the class clown in an effort to hide their academic abilities to maintain social relations. In this sense “social self-concept takes precedence over academic self-concept” (Ford, 1996, p. 105).

In the internalization stage, students become more pluralistic. Gifted Black students “learn to achieve academically without taking on characteristics of the dominant culture-characteristics that appear to threaten the maintenance of the Black community. Achievement is not equated with ‘acting White’ or loss of identity as a Black person” (Ford, 1996, p. 105). It is during this stage that academic and social self-concepts become more cohesive. Students typically get to this stage with the help of role models, mentors, and supportive adults. In the internalization-commitment stage, Black students become
more proactive in bringing about change to Blacks and other minority groups and become more politically active (Ford, 1996; Ford et al., 1994).

While all of the reviewed studies on academic self-concept and racial identity found varying levels of racial identity in participants, they each found that a relationship exists. This is important because for high-achieving African American college students, issues might arise reconciling having a positive academic self-concept and racial identity.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore how various social sources of self-knowledge influenced the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a PWI. Building upon the existing understanding of academic self-concept and its influences and using social psychological theories that focused on social sources of self-knowledge, this research examined how the social comparison process and reflected appraisals influenced the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students in a university context. While these theories do not specifically address how academic self-concept is influenced for high-achieving African American college students, they served as a lens through which the data was analyzed.

A review of the literature shows that there are several social factors that significantly influence what Black college students think of their academic ability, such as institutional context, class standing, gender, significant others, and racial identity. In addition, the reviewed literature sheds light on the experiences of high-achieving African American college students and influences on academic self-concept for Black students.
Currently these literature bases are separate and somewhat distinct. This research fills a
void in the literature by uniting the literature that exists on high-achieving African
American college students and academic self-concept by using social psychological
theories as a theoretical framework.
Chapter 3

Research Design

Previous research has examined the many factors that affect the academic self-concept of African American students. However, these factors are often treated as isolated and unrelated. Informed by a phenomenological perspective, the purpose of this study was to understand and generate a model of how social sources of self-knowledge influence academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Academic self-concept was defined as what students think of their academic ability and high-achieving African American college students were students who received an academic fellowship at a PWI. Social sources of self-knowledge included to whom high-achieving African American college students compared themselves academically and how the appraisals of others influenced their academic self-concept. The appraisals of others came in the form of particular individuals or in the form of a generalized other, meaning society and culture.

The following research question guided this study: How do social sources of self-knowledge influence, both positively and negatively, the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American students at a PWI? These social sources of self-knowledge included to whom high-achieving African American college students compared themselves academically and how the appraisals of others influenced their academic self-concept. The appraisals of others came from significant others, such as family and
friends, as well as from a generalized other, meaning society and culture. The role of racial identity, a component of one’s self-concept, was also explored.

Following is a discussion of how the question was answered, specifically, the theoretical perspective that guided the study, the methodology, and preliminary conceptual framework. Sampling strategies, data collection, data analysis methods, and issues relating to trustworthiness are also discussed.

Pilot Study

This research was informed by a larger research project that I was engaged in from 2003 through 2005 with three other researchers. The research project focused on exploring the effect of living in an intentionally designed scholarly and diverse living learning environment for first-year students. As part of this project, I had the opportunity to pilot an interview protocol and, as a result, developed a preliminary conceptual model of factors influencing the academic self-concept of high achievers.

The larger research project consisted of interviews with a sample of first-year students living in an intentionally designed diverse scholarly living/learning environment at a large research institution in the Northeast. The sample included first-year students, some of whom were a part of the Fellowship Program (Fellows) from which I drew my sample, although there is no overlap between the pilot study and the current study.

Natasha\(^2\), an African American woman and Javier and Juan, both Latino men, were interviewed four times. All three were Fellows. I interviewed Natasha three times

\(^2\) All names are pseudonyms.
over the course of her first year and once in her sophomore year. I also interviewed Javier and Juan once in their sophomore year and reviewed the transcripts of their three interviews during their first year (conducted by another member of the research team). In addition, I interviewed Largo, an African American woman, and Tiffany, an Indian woman, three times their first year and once their sophomore year. While Largo and Tiffany both had GPAs above 3.0 and lived in the same residence hall as the other participants, they were not Fellows.

Having the opportunity to analyze the data from the initial three interviews gave me insight that aided in the development of an interview protocol for the current research. It was during the fourth interview that I piloted the interview questions that were used for the current research. Based on the responses received from the pilot study, I was able to revise the interview protocol to better address the research question. The pilot study also allowed me to explore concepts not originally included in the interview protocol such as the role of the Black church and religion on academic self-concept. In addition, based on the findings, I was better able to explore how certain programmatic components of the fellowship program influenced academic self-concept. This was accomplished through observations of certain activities that participants identified as influential.

Although the current research focused solely on African American students, the findings from all the participants in the pilot study helped inform this research, as they were all members of underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. Based upon the findings in the pilot study, a preliminary conceptual framework was developed.
The preliminary conceptual framework for this study (see Appendix A) stems from previous research on high-achieving African American college students (Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001), social-psychological understanding of the social world as a source of knowledge (Cooley, 1902/1998; Mead, 1934), and findings from the pilot study. The purpose of the current research is to understand and generate a model of how social sources influence the academic self-perceptions of high-achieving African American college students at PWIs. Because I employed qualitative methods and methodology, the initial conceptual framework was necessarily tentative and open to change. However, I entered the current research with the understanding that previous research on high-achieving African American college students and academic self-concept informed the framework.

The preliminary model proposed that high-achieving African American college students enter college with an academic self-concept influenced by a variety of social sources of self-knowledge. These students presumably did not become high achievers in college; they were probably academically successful in high school and had perceptions about their academic ability. As such, their previous experiences influence who they currently are. These academic self-perceptions, characteristics, and experiences influenced how these students experience college and how they maintained their academic self-concept.

Because I entered the research with the assumption that the self is socially constructed (James, 1968/1980), one of the primary influences on the self is the social
world. Previous research (Cokley, 2001, 2003b; Fleming, 1984; House, 1992; Okech & Harrington, 2002; Reynolds, 1988) indicates that for African American college students several sources of self-knowledge, such as institutional type, class standing, gender, racial identity, and significant others influence academic self-concept.

Findings from the pilot study indicated that academic performance as measured by GPA influenced academic self-concept such that when the students’ GPA was higher, they tended to be more positive about their academic abilities. In addition, students discussed the importance of family support and encouragement. Finally, students spoke of the role of being a Fellow. They stated that it was important for them to be involved with and see other academically successful underrepresented students, as they were often the only one in their high school classes. They also stated that, while they were grateful and honored to be Fellows, they often did not share that information with non-Fellows because they were teased for “being a nerd” and White students thought they were Fellows and at the institution only because they were a minority and not because of their academic achievement. This is in line with research on high achievers feeling as though they have to prove themselves and hiding their academic ability (Fries-Britt, 2002; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001).

Methodology

Qualitative methodology and methods are used to answer research questions that focus on the “how’s and what’s” (Creswell, 1998). As I was interested in exploring how academic self-concept was influenced in a population that is often understudied, high-
achieving African American college students, a qualitative design was well suited. Qualitative research is naturalistic and field focused. The researcher goes to the participants and works in their environment. The researcher, in a sense, becomes a fly on the wall in the lives of people’s everyday existence. In addition, the role of the researcher is integral. The researcher, or learner (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) can not be separated from the research. They are inextricably tied together in many senses. The researcher is learning as they conduct their research. This is linked to the fact that “the knowledge constructed during a qualitative study is interpretive” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 35). The researcher’s interpretation of what is being studied is tied to their worldview or paradigm. How the researcher conceptualizes knowledge will influence the methods a researcher uses, perceived purpose for conducting research, and how data are interpreted and analyzed.

Fetterman (1989) discusses the risk of not explaining findings or processes enough because of the researcher’s familiarity with an environment. There are several tools that the researcher can use to avoid this, such as member checks (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Because of my familiarity with the participants and the Fellowship Program, it became important for me to engage in member checks to ensure that my findings were an accurate reflection of participants’ experiences.

This research was informed by the grounded theory and phenomenological traditions. Grounded theory involves the generation of a theory from data that has been systematically collected and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As the end-result of this research was the generation of a theory grounded in the data of how sources of self-knowledge influence the academic
self-concept of high-achieving African American college students, grounded theory methodology and methods were used. A detailed discussion of these methods is found in the data analysis section.

In addition, a phenomenological perspective informed this study. Phenomenology explores the essence of individuals’ lived experiences, and focuses on individuals’ perception of reality, and the way the world appears to them (Creswell, 1998). Exploring people’s perceptions of their academic abilities is inherently phenomenological, because it is concerned with individuals’ perceptions and beliefs of what they are like as opposed to what they are really like (Brown, 1998). Because of this, a phenomenological perspective was also well suited to this research.

**Context**

To gain a better understanding of the phenomena under study, it is important to discuss the context in which the research occurred. In qualitative research the researcher engages in the research process and becomes part of the research (Creswell, 1998). Because of this, it is important to understand my role in the research. In addition, because the research took place at The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State), University Park, it is also important to have an understanding of the institutional context that influences the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students.
Researcher as Context

In qualitative research, the researcher is part of the research, influences, and is influenced by the research process (Creswell, 1998). I therefore became part of the research and because of this, it is important that I reflect upon my “relationship with the phenomena under exploration” (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002, p. 454) and explore how my past experiences affected how I approached the research.

Very early in my academic career, I knew that my research would focus on the experiences of African American college students. After reading an article that discussed the experiences of high-achieving African American college students (Fries-Britt, 2002), I became increasingly interested in exploring the experiences of this population, particularly their academic experiences. As a Black woman who was academically successful I related in some instances to the experiences of this population and had a personal interest in understanding their experiences and what helped and hindered their academic achievement. My interest in this topic also stemmed from my desire to assist undergraduate students academically. I wanted to know what helps and/or hinders African American students’ success and then work to ensure that these students remain successful and use what I have learned to assist those students who may not be academically successful.

I entered Penn State, University Park as an undergraduate in 1987 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Speech Communication in 1991. I returned to Penn State in 2002 as a doctoral student, after working several years and receiving a Masters of Arts in Counseling at another institution. Although I was not a participant in a Fellowship
Program or another honors program, I recognize that who I am and what I have experienced affected how I conducted the research. In some instances, I saw myself reflected in the sample and in other instances; there were clear differences in my experiences and subsequent reactions. It became important that I recognize and acknowledge this as I engaged in the research, all the while recognizing that my reactions to similar circumstances and assumptions may or may not be the same as participants.

To assist in the process of self-reflexivity I maintained notes of my perceptions of the students’ experiences and how they were similar and different from mine. I also discussed these experiences and strategies with colleagues. As I interviewed participants, I purposefully allowed the participant to lead the direction of the interviews, with very little feedback from me. Because I saw myself in many of the participants and could relate to their experiences, I purposefully did not disclose my personal experiences and allowed them to explain fully their experiences because I did not want to make any assumptions about their perceptions and experiences.

**Pre-college experiences**

I grew up in an urban city in Northern New Jersey that was predominantly Black. My parents divorced when I was young. I always lived in a predominantly Black neighborhood and attended predominantly White private schools, even though both my parents were educators in the public school system, my mother an elementary school teacher in predominantly Black schools and my father, an elementary and middle school principal in racially diverse schools.
I come from a family of educators. My mother is an elementary school teacher, my father a retired principal, and my uncle a retired music professor. I also come from a family that stressed education not only in words but also by example. My mother enrolled in graduate school as I began my doctoral studies and earned a Masters degree, my father also has a Masters degree, and my uncle earned a Ph.D. As such, education was always stressed in my family as a necessity and an “understood”. In other words, there was never a question about my going to college, being a third generation college student, it was understood that I would. I always knew education was the key to unlocking many doors. This idea was reinforced in my young mind when I attended my grandfather’s college graduation. He received his Bachelor’s degree in Sociology when I was in elementary school or middle school. I do not recall exactly how old I was, but what I do remember is being proud of him. As I looked at his graduating class, I recall realizing that he was probably the oldest person in his class. I was proud that my grandfather had made the decision to go to college, get his degree, while still working. I knew if he could do it, I could do well in school also.

My identity was that of the “smart” one in my family and my family and friends played an important role in my academic life through their encouragement and support. I was praised and rewarded for many things, but the one thing that I honed in on and recognized that made me unique was my academic ability and I relished in this praise. You could say anything about me, but if you ever said that I was not smart or not living up to my academic potential, that is what hurt me to the core. I wanted to get good grades; I wanted to be able to tell people little known facts. I had to know everything and I soaked up knowledge as if I was a sponge. No one had to make me study. I found things
to study on my own. I created extra homework for myself. Being the child of a teacher, everything was a lesson in our house and I thought that that was how it was for everyone.

I was never very competitive, except when it came to school. I wanted to be the best and at the top of my class, although this was not something I shared with others. I rarely shared my grades with others, but was always willing to help others. I was content knowing for myself that I was the best; I did not care if any of my peers knew this or not, it was only important that I knew it, that my teachers knew it, and that my family knew it.

I also come from a family that is involved in the Black church. My grandmother is a minister and I can recall as a young person (and to this date) going to her church and feeling like it was home and that the people there were family. My church family always asked how I was doing in school and provided through prayer and encouragement, support. I perceived them and God as believing in me and this made me know that I could do all things.

Growing up, I had two sets of friends, friends from school, mostly White, and friends outside of school, all Black. It was my “outside of school” friends to whom I was closest. It was not until high school where I met more Black students in my classes who were academically successful that my school friends became my outside of school friends, as well as my closest friends. Although this was the case, I compared myself academically to the top performers in my school, regardless of race and academic ability. However, the top performers were most often White. I was always in the top of my classes and chose the most challenging courses. I was very confident in my academic abilities and it was reflected in my grades and my choice of co-curricular activities.
In elementary/middle school, more Blacks began to attend my school. I never quite fit in with them. They knew me and I knew them, but we were not close. I was never teased for my academic interests or for acting “White” or talking “White”. I was quiet, so everyone just thought I was nice and quiet. My closest friends were the White students. I had one Black friend who lived in the same apartment complex as me, and we were good friends before she transferred to my school. She was part of the “in” group with the Black kids. I was not. But, because she and I were friends, I gained some entry to the group. Although I quickly found that we had very different focuses. I was interested in learning and school and doing well academically, they did fairly well academically, but they were more focused on socializing. It was not until high school where I met Black students who were as academically focused as I was that I was able to merge my academic and social friends into one group.

**College experiences**

When I arrived at Penn State, I was very confident in my academic abilities. I knew I was smart and no one could tell me otherwise. Having high grades and a high class standing were key influences on my academic self-concept prior to coming to college. However, my first semester grades, which were very low, caused me to question my academic abilities. I was not as confident and my academic self-concept was low. My family and friends helped me recognize that my grades were not a true reflection of my academic abilities or who I was, but that I also needed to figure out why they were so low and make the appropriate changes. Because of my family’s support, I was again confident
of my academic abilities, regardless of my GPA, although my GPA increased. It was at this point that significant others in my life took on a more influential role in influencing my academic self-concept rather than grades and class rank.

By the time I declared a major in my junior year, I began to believe again that I was on the same level academically as others. What I found for myself was that as my grades dropped, the sources that had influences on my academic self-concept shifted. Prior to getting low grades, grades and honors were very important to my academic self-concept. After receiving low grades for the first time in my life, family and friends had an even greater impact on my academic self-concept.

In addition, during my first two years at Penn State, my reference group changed. I no longer compared myself to all students. I compared myself to those people who were closest to me and those people were all African American. During my senior and junior years, my reference group changed again. I compared myself to not only African American students, but to those students in my classes, who were primarily White. It seemed as if when my academic self-concept was lower and my grades were low, I compared myself to Black students, but as I became more confident and my academic self-concept became more positive, I compared myself to Whites.

The three “R’s”: Racial identity, racial socialization, and racism

I identify as a Black woman. My race is a defining characteristic of who I am. As a child, I can recall several instances where my mother tried to instill in me a sense of pride in being a Black girl. She would always make sure that I saw myself reflected
positively. Whether it meant searching all over to find a Black Raggedy Ann doll, to finding cards with Black people on them and if she could not find one, coloring the faces in with a brown crayon, to always supporting Blacks in the community.

Incidents often occurred in school where my mother had to go to the school to talk to my teachers about challenging me academically, putting all the Black kids in the back of the classroom, not calling on the Black students, questioning the authenticity of the Black students’ work, and about the school not telling students about career fairs that focused on historically Black colleges and universities. This was my reality. The list goes on. My mother was constantly fighting for my education. But, through it all, I was always told that I was smart, but that I had to work and study hard, it was not an option to just get by. I had to be better because there would always be people who questioned my ability.

Although as a young person I received messages from my family about what it meant to be Black, I did not experience my first instance of overt racism until I came to Penn State. My first week as a Penn State I was called nigger. On a warm August afternoon in 1987, my roommate (who was Black), and two Black football players were sitting on a bench on College Avenue, when a car full of White males drove by and yelled “NIGGER!!!”. It took me a moment to process what happened. We were all in shock. “Did they just say what I think they said?” I asked. The football players nodded and solemnly said, “That’s been happening since we’ve been here. It happens all the time”. Welcome to Penn State. This, I found was a theme in this study, but for many students, their academic abilities buffered them from negatively experiencing negative effects of racism or negative stereotypes. I think the same happened for me, although at
that point, I had nothing to show, other than my high school record, so getting such a low first semester GPA in a place where I was doubted and called nigger had a negative influence on my academic self-concept. Did I deserve to be here? It took going home for Christmas break being around my family and friends and other Blacks to convince me that I deserved to be at Penn State. Being home and being around “home” (other Blacks) boosted my academic self-concept and gave me something else to base my academic self-concept on besides just grades. I came back to Penn State on a mission to prove to everyone that I deserved to be there and that I was as, if not more academically capable than the next person. As I cycled through the stages of racial identity, so did my academic self-concept cycle.

While I have experienced varying forms of racism in my life, it is interesting to note that the experiences that are most vivid in my memory are those that are associated with and occurred in the context of a school or related to academic pursuits. Because of this and findings from the research, it is my assertion that race, racism, and racial socialization messages, and racial identity are all intricately tied to the academic self-concept of not only high-achieving students, but also quite possibly all underrepresented students of color.

All of these experiences have shaped me into the person I am. Because of these experiences, I enter the research with a bias. The participants were like me in a number of ways and were at the same institution I attended. Because of these similarities, I had to constantly make sure that I remained open to hear the participants’ stories that were in many instances, very different from mine and some instances, very similar. However
similar or different their experiences, it was their interpretation that I remained cognizant of throughout the research process.

Because of my experiences as an African American female undergraduate student at Penn State who entered with a very high academic self-concept. I am interested in studying those students who may be similar to me in those respects, yet who are different because they are part of a fellowship program and have been able to maintain a high GPA, something that I was not able to do consistently as an undergraduate student.

**Institution as Context**

Because this research took place at The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State), it is important to examine the context in which the research occurred. Penn State is a large predominantly White research university located in rural Pennsylvania. In Spring 2005 there were 29,926 full-time degree-seeking undergraduate students at the University Park campus, of that, 4.3% were African American. In Fall 2004, of the 1,291 full-time degree-seeking undergraduate African American students at University Park, the majority had overall GPAs below 3.0 (63.5%) while 36.5% had a GPA of 3.0 or higher. In addition, 80.8% of high achievers (GPA of 3.0 or better) at University Park were White, .1% were American Indian, 5.2% were Asian American or Pacific Islander, 1.7% were Hispanic American, .7% were Puerto Rican, 1.9% were international and 2.5% were African American ("The Penn State data warehouse, student database," 2005). Based on this, we see that African American students are underrepresented as high achievers, while White students are overrepresented.
Honors Programs as Context

There are several honors and honors-type programs that exist within the context of the institution. In order to have a better understanding of the program from which I selected my sample, it is beneficial to understand other programs at the institution, such as Schreyer Honors College, which has programmatic components similar to yet distinct from the Bunton-Waller Fellowship Program. In fact, one of the Fellowship program co-directors wants Fellows to be as, if not more, academically successful than the Schreyer students. Even though this friendly competition occurs, the co-director encourages Fellows to apply to and be part of the Honors College. It is important to note that many Fellows are also Schreyer Honors students. In fact, according to the program co-director, most, if not all of the African American Schreyer Honors College students are also Bunton-Waller Fellows, although the reverse is not true.

The three-fold mission of the Honors College is to promote “achieving academic excellence with integrity, building a global perspective, and creating opportunities for leadership and civic engagement”. The vision is “to educate men and women who will make important differences in the world, affecting academic, professional, civic, social, and business outcomes [and] to improve educational practice and to be recognized as a leading force in honors education nationwide” (Schreyer honors college).

While students have the opportunity to become part of the Honors College through the Junior Gate program (applications are submitted at the end of sophomore year) “based upon an excellent Penn State record and nomination by their major department”, the majority of students are admitted to Schreyer their first year through a
special application process. Schreyer Honors College aims for a first year admittance of 300 students with 200 admitted through the Junior Gate (Schreyer honors college).

Generally, students with excellent high school records and SAT scores of at least 1350 are considered competitive applicants to Schreyer. In making decisions, the Honors College looks at essays, activities, and teacher references. The average SAT score is 1428 and average high school GPA is 4.08 (weighted) (Schreyer honors college).

All honors students have access to honors courses, research opportunities, and must complete a senior thesis in order to graduate “with honors”. Students also receive a monetary award. This includes the Academic Excellence Award for $2500 renewable for a total of eight semesters. Some students are also eligible for $10,000 merit awards. Students have the option to reside in a living-learning community specifically for honors students. The residential component consists of out-of classroom programs developed by honors students working with Scholar Assistants (Schreyer honors college).

Of the more than 1,700 students in the Honors College, approximately 1,550 are at University Park, representing about 4% of the University Park undergraduate population (Schreyer honors college). During the academic year 2004-2005, the average GPA was 3.80 (Schreyer honors college: Annual report 2005: Facts and figures, 2005). According to the Honors College Strategic Plan, in Spring 2004 of the 1833 total students enrolled in Schreyer, 63 (3.4%) represented under-represented minority students (Schreyer honors college: Strategic plan 2005-06 through 2007-08, February 1, 2005).
Bunton-Waller Fellowship Program as Context

For the purpose of this study, a high-achieving African American college student was defined as an African American student who participated in the Bunton-Waller Fellowship Program (Fellow) at Penn State, University Park. It is important to note that while I recruited a sample of African American students for the current research from the Fellowship Program, participants in the Fellowship Program are reflective of the university student population and are not exclusively African American. This definition and criteria for identifying high-achieving African American college students through participation in an academic program is consistent with previous research on similar populations (Fries-Britt, 1998; Hrabowski III et al., 1998). Although there are other honors and honors-type programs at the institution, I chose participants from this program because of the various components inherent in the program and because it provided a set group of students who were already considered high-achieving by virtue of their receipt and maintenance of the fellowship. Because many of the components of the Fellowship Program emerged as influential on academic self-concept in the current research, it is important to have an understanding of the history of the program, along with the recruitment and selection process of Fellows, and the various components of the program.

Because little information about this program is made available to the general public, the context provided below was generated from multiple discussions with the Co-Directors of the Bunton-Waller Fellowship Program as well as the college Multicultural Directors (also known as college diversity administrators), and observations of the
programmatic components. Below is information about the Fellowship Program based on these observations.

**History of the fellowship program**

Named after the first African American man (Calvin Waller) and woman (Mildred Bunton) to graduate from Penn State, the Bunton-Waller Fellowship Program originated in the early 1990’s. According to one of the program’s co-directors, the number of students of color admitted to the university was extremely low and, according to one of the Multicultural Directors, there was a problem recruiting high-achieving students of color. It was suggested that the university provide monetary assistance to academically successful students of color to aid in their recruitment to the university. While this appeared to be a good idea, the program directors recognized that it had to be more than just a monetary solution. Students of color were also having adjustment issues that needed to be addressed. The program co-directors pushed for a transitional program that would assist *all* students in adjusting to Penn State. As a result, the Pennypacker Experience, a scholarly diverse living/learning community was designed as a residence hall that would incorporate several components to assist students in their transition. Today there are approximately 200 undergraduate Fellows at the University Park campus and the Pennypacker Experience houses approximately 250 first-year students, including the first-year Fellows and students interested in the first-year science and engineering special living option.
Recruitment and selection process

Fellows are identified as entering first-year students. The selection process typically occurs from December through May prior to students’ arrival at University Park. The Mildred S. Bunton and Calvin Waller Undergraduate Fellowship Program seeks to enhance the diversity of undergraduate representation at the Pennsylvania State University. Bunton-Waller Fellows must enroll at the University Park campus and live in Pennypacker Hall during their first academic year in order to receive the scholarship.

The Bunton-Waller Fellows Scholarship attracts students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds who have demonstrated academic potential and are eligible to attend Penn State. The scholarship offers full in-state tuition, room and board to Commonwealth of Pennsylvania residents, and out of state tuition to non-resident freshmen, resulting in a student body that more closely reflects the cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity in Pennsylvania and the nation (The Bunton-Waller fellows program).

According to the student aid website, the selection process is as follows: “The Office of Undergraduate Admissions and University academic colleges review the profiles of outstanding students and select eligible candidates. Priority consideration may be given to students who are underrepresented in the University’s student body” (The Bunton-Waller fellows program).

According to one Multicultural Director, although there are minimum standards one must achieve to be considered for a Fellowship, such as recommended SAT, predicted college GPA, and high school GPA, there are some differences in what each
college looks for and how they identify students. For example, some directors have relationships with high schools or summer enrichment programs for high school students. For some, this serves as a means of recruiting Fellows to the university. Others review the list of admitted students to their college and make decisions based on their academic merits and an essay that potential Fellows are asked to write. It is also important to note that, depending on the college, students may be selected or have to apply for the Fellowship.

After potential Fellows are identified, the selection process again varies within each college. Directors typically contact the students to discuss scholarship opportunities via a phone interview. The questions vary across colleges. For example, one director wants to make sure that the student has a commitment to receiving a degree in his college, even though the award can be transferred from college to college within the institution. Because this award is committed to enhancing the diversity of the undergraduate population at Penn State, he also asks the student to define diversity and discuss how they can contribute to the diversity of Penn State. Another Director indicated that in selecting students for the award, she tries to anticipate who will be successful based on their profile. Her motivation is trying to determine who will be able to retain the award. In addition to talking to the student, Directors may also talk to family members to get a better understanding of the student and their needs.

Each year there are approximately 50 fellowships awarded to first-year students. Of the 50, each college has a certain number of fellowships they can award. Fellows are notified about their selection from December to the end of April (The Bunton-Waller fellows program). Once the Fellowship is offered, usually via a follow up phone call,
letters and a contract are sent to the student confirming their acceptance of the award. The student must sign and return the contract to accept officially the Fellowship.

**Components of the fellowship program**

There are several components of the program: financial, academic, and residential. As previously stated, the award covers full tuition for in-state and out-of-state students, and room and board for in-state students for a total of eight semesters (not including summer).

To remain in the program and retain the Fellowship, first-year students must maintain an overall GPA of 2.75 and upper-class students must maintain a 3.0, although all students are encouraged to make the Dean’s List (3.5 GPA). In fact, most of the participants in the current study had a GPA well above 3.0. If a student falls below the required GPA for their class standing, they can petition the program and ask to be placed on academic probation. The program makes the determination whether to place the student on academic probation for the semester following or to deny the petition. If students are granted probation and if they are able to increase their overall GPA to the requirement, they retain their fellowship. If they do not reach the required overall GPA, they lose the fellowship with no possibility of regaining the award. For students who have previously been on academic probation through the program and fall below the required GPA for a second time, they lose the fellowship with no possibility of regaining the award.
During the first year, all Fellows are required to live in Pennypacker Hall, also
known as the Pennypacker Experience. The Pennypacker Experience is managed by an
Advisory Board consisting of the college Multicultural Directors, administrators in the
Housing and Residence Life Division, as well as other administrators on campus. The
main goal of this scholarly diverse scholarly living/learning community “is to create a
supportive educational and social environment for incoming freshmen while
simultaneously promoting diversity in gender, race and ethnic background” (*The Bunton-
Waller fellows program*). In addition to housing all incoming Bunton-Waller Fellows,
Pennypacker Hall also houses students in the First-Year in Science and Engineering
(FISE) Interest House.

An Advisory Board, live-in undergraduate Program Assistants, and Resident
Assistants support all students living in Pennypacker, not just the Fellows. The Program
Assistants are live in students who assist residents with their academic adjustment to the
university. They serve as academic mentors and role models. In addition, they plan
several academic programs throughout the year for all residents on topics ranging from
academic integrity, to making socially responsible decisions, to career decision-making.
All residents benefit from having tutors in the building on a weekly basis in the subject
areas of math, biology, physics, and chemistry. All of these programs are designed to
foster a sense of community in the students as they all work towards the common goal of
academic success (Dean’s List) and achieving a common identity of a scholar.

During the summer advising session that all University Park students are required
to attend, all Fellows are scheduled on the same day. There is a luncheon for the Fellows
and their family members during which students meet the program co-directors, the
multicultural directors, and each other. It is here where the students begin to hear the message that they are expected to make the Dean’s List, to be scholars, good citizens, and to look at each other and the staff as their family. When first-year Fellows move into Pennypacker, there is another reception for first-year Fellows and their families where they once again hear these messages and meet the staff and each other. These messages are consistently reinforced throughout the first year. Fellows also receive a handbook that explains the program and the requirements and expectations of the program.

All incoming Bunton-Waller students are required to attend mandatory program meetings and enroll in the Bunton-Waller Freshman Seminar taught out of the African-American Studies department, “Scholarship and the Community”. “This course intends to foster an academic community in a residential environment. The course addresses topics that pertain to such a community and seeks to enhance students’ academic and social experiences in college” (*The Bunton-Waller fellows program*). The current format of the course is that of a workshop. Students meet approximately four or five times during the year and cover a variety of topics such as adjusting to college, racial identity, and how to be a successful student. In addition, at the beginning of the semester over Labor Day weekend, all first year Fellows attend a two-day retreat that has as its goal building community and learning effective strategies to be an academically successful student.

According to one of the program co-directors, the Fellowship program and Fellows participation in the Pennypacker Experience has historically been a transitional program aimed at assisting the students in their adjustment to Penn State. The focus is on helping the students build an identity as a scholar and an academically successful student through their experiences living in Pennypacker Hall. Historically, there was not much
programming or group activities for Fellows beyond their first-year, but that changed in 2005-06. The Office created a list serve in an effort to keep Fellows connected with each other and developed several academic and social programs in an effort to assist the Fellows in maintaining an identity as a scholar and give them the tools necessary to be a good citizen.

Sample

To answer effectively the research question, it was important to select a sample that had experience with the phenomena under investigation. The following section addresses the sampling procedures chosen for this study.

Sampling Procedures

Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants for the study (Creswell, 1998). This allowed the selection of participants based on their ability to contribute to the theory that I constructed. In the grounded theory tradition, it is best to identify a homogenous sample so that a detailed theory can result (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Therefore, as previously stated, high-achieving African American college students were defined as African American students who participated in an academic fellowship program, the Bunton-Waller Fellowship Program. Again, it is important to note that while it was from this population that I recruited a sample of African American students
for the current research, participants in the Fellowship Program come from diverse backgrounds and are not solely African American students.

The sample consisted of self-identified African American sophomores and seniors who were 18 years or older and Fellows at Penn State, University Park campus. Sophomores provided information relevant to the first year of college and seniors provided data from a group of students who were at the end of their academic careers. The seniors have a history at the institution and were better able to discuss how factors within the university influenced their academic self-concept. This was confirmed in the pilot study. Because I interviewed students in their first and sophomore years, I was able to observe differences in their responses. As sophomores, responses were more reflective, thus leading to the decision to interview sophomores as opposed to first-year students. In addition, they had all declared majors and were better adjusted to living at Penn State and the academic rigors of the university.

It is important to note that I currently work as a graduate assistant in one of the offices that administers the Fellowship Program and the Pennypacker Experience. As such, one of my responsibilities involved assisting with the planning and coordinating of activities for Fellows, giving me a lot of interaction with the Fellows. Having this interaction might have had impact on my recruitment of participants and their subsequent responses to interview questions. After meeting with the program co-director in Fall 2004, he agreed that I would have access to and be able to use the African American students who were also Fellows as my sample. It was in Spring 2005 that I discovered I was hired for the assistantship in the office.
A large group meeting for all Fellows is typically held each year in the beginning of the Fall semester. I was responsible for planning this meeting. A separate email was sent to the sophomore and senior Fellows who were African American requesting that they arrive at the group meeting 15 minutes early. At the meeting, the program Co-Director welcomed all students. He then asked students to form a circle with their respective class (i.e., first-year, sophomore, junior, senior). The Co-Director introduced me to the large group and informed the students that I was conducting a study with students who were sophomores or seniors and African American. He indicated that I would be talking to each group in more detail about my study. I stepped into the middle of the first-year circle, introduced myself and the study to all students in the circle (see Appendix B for recruitment script). I asked interested students who were sophomores and self-identified as African American to sign up on a sheet for two interviews that would last approximately one hour, at least three days apart. The same process was followed for seniors. Individual emails were then sent to participants at least two days prior to their interview thanking them for agreeing to participate and to remind them of their interview date and time.

As a result of this recruitment, 19 participants self-selected to participate in the research. The original sample consisted of 11 self-identified African American sophomores, 9 women and 2 men. One participant (“Anna”) was not used after completing both interviews and reviewing her transcripts. She was born and raised in a French speaking African country and came to the United States as a teenager and did not speak English when she arrived to the United States. Because of these experiences, which were qualitatively different from the rest of the sample, I eliminated Anna from the
sample. There were eight self-identified African American sophomores, five women and three men. Of the five women (Victoria), one did not return for the second interview, which was to focus on college experiences. As this research was interested in exploring influences on academic self-concept in the context of the university, Victoria was also dropped from the study. Refer to Appendix C for participant summary.

Data Collection

In qualitative research, data collection should occur in a natural setting (Creswell, 1998). This means that the research is conducted and data is collected in the field. Interviews and observations are often the primary form of data collection. As such, individual interviews were conducted with participants. I also met with the program co-directors, college diversity administrators, and attended activities coordinated by the program. In addition, by virtue of my position as a graduate assistant, I had a lot of personal interaction with participants, as well as the opportunity to observe participants in their natural setting, and participate in meetings and other activities as part of the program. These additional interactions allowed me to observe students in their natural setting and gave me additional insight to the program, staff, and students providing additional data to analyze and also assisting in contextualizing the role of the Fellowship Program in the lives of participants. These interactions also assisted in the trustworthiness of the data by allowing me to see in person what participants discussed during their individual interviews.
**Participant Interviews**

Interviews were the primary data collection method. Two semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 19 participants over the course of Fall 2005. Individual interviews were conducted in a conference room in the College of Science Assistant Dean’s Office and tape recorded with the participants’ permission.

The first interview was used to build rapport with the participants and to collect background information about the participants, their pre-college experiences, with a specific focus on gathering details about the social influences on their academic self-concept prior to coming to Penn State. The second interview examined the social factors that influenced the participants’ academic self-concept since they have been at Penn State. In this interview the participants were also asked to reflect on the meaning of the influences on their academic self-concept (see Appendix D for the interview protocol). Because of my position with the program, I was asked by the program directors to include questions in the protocol about specific components of the program. These questions are noted on the interview protocol. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

The first and second interviews were spaced from 3 days to one-week apart dependent upon the availability of the participants. Spacing the interviews in this manner allowed enough time for the participants to reflect on the previous interview while not losing the “connection between the two” (Seidman, 1998, p. 15). Before the second interview was conducted, the tape of the first interview was transcribed and coded. In cases were there was not enough time between the interviews to transcribe the tape, I
listened to the tape of the first interview and noted relevant themes. As the analysis process in qualitative research is an ongoing process (Creswell, 1998) reviewing the transcript of the first interview prior to the second interview allowed me to develop initial codes and identify areas that I needed to follow up or explore further in the second interview.

Participants were compensated with $5.00 for interview one and $5.00 for interview two to thank them for their time. Prior to the start of each interview, participants read, signed, and dated two copies of the informed consent form (see Appendix E for the Institutional Review Board approved informed consent). Participants retained one copy for their records and I retained the second copy. Participants were assured of their confidentiality, as each participant selected a pseudonym to be used through the course of the research. Participants were also asked to complete a data sheet to collect background information such as their pseudonym, parent/guardian race and education levels, hometown, age, and academic major (see Appendix F for sample data sheet).

**Administrator Interviews**

Because specific information about the program is not made available to the general public and to gain a better understanding of the program details, I met with and interviewed both program co-coordinators of the program in addition to meeting with several multicultural directors at the university. This additional information about the program offered a richer understanding of the nature of the program, criteria, and
parameters for participation in the program. Much of the information garnered was discussed in the previous section contextualizing the Bunton-Waller Fellowship Program.

Observations

In addition to the multiple interviews, I attended and observed several of the activities coordinated by the program for all Fellows. During these observations, I systematically took field notes that I reviewed after the activity and during the analysis process. These observations included the retreat for first-year Fellows, several class sessions of the first-year seminar, the two-day retreat, and many of the programs planned for all Pennypacker residents and Fellows.

I also worked closely with the Bunton-Waller Fellows Class Representatives. This was the first year that such a position existed. At the same meeting where I recruited participants, each class was asked to select one male and one female class representative. These class representatives were responsible for assisting in the social and academic program planning for Fellows and also had the opportunity to develop their leadership skills by facilitating meetings and participating in conferences to enhance their professional development. In previous years, there was typically a large group meeting for all Fellows in the Fall and also in the Spring. These were the only times that all Fellows would gather together. In the 2005 – 2006 year, working with the class representatives, we implemented several programs for all Fellows to socialize with each other. This was the first year that these additional activities occurred such as a Dean’s List Reception for all Fellows, Movie Night, and a large group meeting for all Fellows.
that focused on communication and interviewing skills. To reinforce the idea of being scholars, a Dean’s List Reception is held yearly for all Pennypacker residents (first-year students). This was the first year that in addition to the Pennypacker Dean’s List Reception, a Dean’s List Reception was held for all Fellows.

Observing these activities offered an insiders view about the programmatic components that influenced the students’ academic self-concept. Based on the pilot study, students reported that living in Pennypacker their first year influenced their academic self-concept in a positive way because other studious students surrounded them, which encouraged them to study. Because of this, I observed Pennypacker Hall in an effort to understand the components of the living/learning community that influenced participants, as they all lived in Pennypacker their first year.

**Data Analysis**

With the participants’ permission, interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using many of the tools employed in the grounded theory tradition. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method to ensure saturation and involved collecting and comparing data to emerging categories until no new information was found that would produce categories (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It was through this process that data were broken down into discrete parts and refined into categories thus building a substantive theory of the phenomena under investigation (Strauss & Corbin). Consistent with grounded theory methods, the analysis process occurred throughout the research process using open, axial, and selective
coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To aid in the analysis process, I used memos and diagrams. Memos assisted in the analysis process by providing a means to “facilitate reflection and analytic insight” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 11). Diagrams were visual “devices that depict the relationships among concepts” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 218). These diagrams changed and evolved throughout the research process and reflected the coding process suggested by Strauss and Corbin, that of open, axial, and selective coding. Following is a description of these processes.

Open coding involves segmenting the data into initial categories. It is “the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 123). The first step in theory building is identifying and grouping together concepts into categories. These categories stand for phenomena, analytic ideas that emerge from the data and are comprised of properties and dimensions. Properties are characteristics of the category, while dimensions are the locations of a property along a continuum (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During open coding, there is often little to diagram, as relationships between concepts may not have emerged. What is useful during the research at this time is a “listing for each category” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 227). As a result of reading each transcript several times, I identified concepts and created open codes relating to influences on academic self-concept. The open codes were handwritten on each transcript, resulting in a listing of codes for each participant in the study.

Axial coding involves assembling the data into new categories, linking properties together into categories, and beginning construction of the theory. It is “the process of relating categories to their subcategories, termed ‘axial’ because coding occurs around
the axis of the category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In other words, axial coding puts the data back together in a meaningful way that was separated in the process of open coding through the identification of causal conditions, intervening conditions, and consequences. Causal conditions refer to the factors that influence the phenomena under study, intervening conditions shape participants responses to the phenomena, all resulting in the consequences of participants’ responses to the phenomena under study.

In the current research, axial codes were developed by creating a visual representation for each participant that included all of the open codes grouped in categories. This resulted in a graphic representation for each of the 17 participants reflecting the identified categories and “the relationships between a category and its subcategories or among several categories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 235). In addition to creating a diagram for each participant, each transcript was coded at the axial level using the qualitative data analysis software NVIVO to further aid in the analysis process and to extract exemplar quotes.

Selective coding is the final step in the analysis process and is used to integrate and refine categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It is the “process of integrating and refining the theory” (p. 143). It is a technique that aids in integration, and the first step in this integration is deciding on a central category (or main themes) based on what emerges from the data. The central category has analytic power by pulling “the other categories together to form an explanatory whole” (p. 146) and “integration occurs over time, beginning with the first steps in analysis and often not ending until the final writing” (p. 161). As a result of the selective coding, I created one diagram of the influences on
academic self-concept for sophomores and one for seniors. After comparing the diagrams for seniors and sophomores and finding no substantive differences, I created one model of how social sources of self-knowledge influenced the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a PWI.

**Trustworthiness**

To assist with the accuracy and add to the credibility of the findings, I engaged in member checks with participants. This involved reviewing my analysis, interpretations, and conclusions with participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) by having them review the generated model and provide feedback. Member checking is a critical component to ensuring credibility because participants should be able to recognize the larger concepts in the theory (Merriam, 2002). To check the accuracy of the findings and the model, a copy was sent to all participants. Participants were asked to review the information and provide feedback as to where the model and findings made sense and where it did not make sense in their experiences. Approximately one-third of the participants responded, all indicating that the model and findings were an accurate interpretation of their experiences.

Although the primary method of data collection was participant interviews, I also met with the program directors and attended programs for the Fellows (Creswell, 1998). I employed other strategies, such as an audit trail and reflexivity. An audit trail involved keeping track of tasks and decision points that occurred in the course of the study (Merriam, 2002). The use of memos aided in this process. I also used a reflexive journal
through the research process to engage in “critical self-reflection” of my assumptions and biases.

**Conclusion**

Through a qualitative design, this study seeks to understand how social sources of self-knowledge influence the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a PWI. There is limited information about the development of high-achieving African American college students in college. Much of the information available about African American students in college focuses on underachieving or underprepared students. Because of the lack of information available about high-achieving African American college students, it may suggest that most African American students are not academically prepared (Fries-Britt, 2002). Because of this view, many high-achieving African American college students encounter stereotypes that question their actual intellectual ability. In addition, this lack of research may lead others to believe that there are not academically successful African American students; this has implications not only for the types of policies and services implemented at universities and colleges, but also for the African American community. If people do not see themselves represented, then it becomes difficult to believe in the possibilities that exist and that they can achieve.

We need to understand better how the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students is influenced. By studying this population, we can understand the development of a positive academic self-concept. Having this knowledge
will not only ensure the continued success of high-achieving African American college students, but will might assist those who are not academically successful, thus possibly decreasing the achievement gap.
This research explored the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a predominantly White institution (PWI). The following research question guided this study: How do social sources of self-knowledge influence, both positively and negatively, the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American students at a PWI? These social sources of self-knowledge included to whom high-achieving African American college students compared themselves academically and how the appraisals of others influenced their academic self-concept. The appraisals of others came from significant others, such as family, friends, and teachers, as well as from a generalized other, meaning society and culture. The role of racial identity, a component of one’s self-concept, was also explored.

Informed by grounded theory and a phenomenological perspective, the end-result of the research is a theory explaining how social sources of self-knowledge influence the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students. Based on the analysis of the data, several categories emerged. From these categories, I developed a model of the social sources of self-knowledge influencing the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a predominantly White institution. In this chapter, I describe demographic information about the participants, describe the major categories identified, and present the model.
Participant Summaries

The criteria for selecting a sample was the following: sophomore or senior class standing, 18 years or older, self-identifies as African American, and part of the Fellowship Program. It is important to note that while I recruited a sample of African American students for the current research from the Fellowship Program, participants in the Fellowship Program are reflective of the university student population and are not exclusively African American. In this section, I provide a summary of information on the sophomore and senior participants (see Appendix C for a more detailed participant summary).

Demographic Summary of Sophomore Participants

The initial sophomore sample consisted of 11 participants, 2 males and 9 females. After completing both interviews, one female participant, Anna, was eliminated form the sample. Anna was born and raised in Cameroon and came to the United States in high school. She did not speak English upon arrival in the United States and learned English while in high school. Because she spent her formative years in another country where she was considered the majority based on her race, her perceptions and experiences were qualitatively different from those participants born and raised in the United States. For these reasons, Anna was excluded from the final sample.

All sophomore participants were 19 years old, with the exception of one who was 18. Participants self-reported their grade point average (GPA), with an average of 3.405, ranging from 3.93 to 2.91. As interviews were conducted early in the Fall 2005 semester,
grades reflected the participant’s first-year GPA. To remain a Fellow, first-year students must have a minimum overall GPA of 2.75 at the end of their first-year, although students are encouraged to make the Dean’s List (3.50).

Participants were interested in pursuing a variety of majors representing both technical (animal science, meteorology, microbiology, wildlife sciences) and non-technical majors (biobehavioral health, finance, hotel and restaurant management, political science, psychology, secondary education). At Penn State students are admitted to the university and to a college (e.g., College of Science, College of the Liberal Arts), but they are not admitted to a major until the end of sophomore year. Because of this, participants had not officially declared a major at the time of the interview. While this was the case, all participants had intentions on declaring a major in the college to which they were admitted, with the exception of one, Serena. Serena was admitted to the College of Science, but at the time of our second interview, she was considering transferring to the College of the Liberal Arts.

Six of the participants grew up in two-parent households. Of the 10 participants, three were first-generation college students. The remaining participants’ parents either completed some college, had earned a bachelor’s or a graduate degree.

Demographic Summary of Senior Participants

The initial senior sample consisted of eight participants, three males and five females. One female participant did not complete the second interview. Since the focus of
the research was on academic self-concept in the context of the university and interview
two focused on these experiences, she was not included in the final sample.

All senior participants were 21 years old, with the exception of one who was 20.
Participants self-reported their grade point averages (GPA) ranging from 3.61 to 2.98,
with an average of 3.31. To remain a Fellow, upper class students must have a minimum
overall GPA of 3.00, although students are encouraged to make the Dean’s List (3.50).
Although one student self-reported an overall GPA below 3.00 (Leroy), it was
subsequently discovered that another participant (Isaac) also had a GPA just below 3.00.
As a result, these two participants were on academic probation by the Fellowship
Program at the time of the interviews. This was not discussed during the interview,
because I was not aware of their probationary status.

Senior participants were pursuing a variety of majors representing both technical
(mechanical engineering, science and Spanish double major, ) and non-technical majors
(biobehavioral health, economics, labor and industrial relations, public relations and
Spanish double major, sociology). With the exception of two participants (Isaac and
John), all participants remained in the college to which they were originally admitted.
Isaac changed his major from engineering to sociology in his junior year and at the time
of the interview John was in the process of changing his major from material science and
engineering to biobehavioral health. Two participants (Donna and Renee) changed their
major within the same college (from crime, law, and justice to labor and industrial
relations and from statistics to science and Spanish respectively). Of the senior
participants, two will graduate Fall 2006 (John and Leroy). The remaining five
participants graduated Spring 2006. Of those five, two have been accepted to graduate school, one to law school, and one to medical school for Fall 2006.

All of the participants grew up in two-parent households, with the exception of one whose father died when he was 13 years old. Of the ten participants, one was a first-generation college student. The remaining had parents who had some college, an associates degree, bachelor’s degree, or graduate degree. Over half of the sample (four) had at least one parent who had a graduate degree.

Social World as an Influence on Academic Self-Concept

The research, as initially conceived, was to examine how academic self-concept might change over time, hence the use of sophomores and seniors in the sample. However, after analyzing the data, no substantive between-group differences in how the social sources of self-knowledge influenced the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a PWI were discovered. In those instances where there were differences, they will be discussed in the appropriate section. However, because the differences were not substantive I present one model of how academic self-concept was influenced.

I present here the findings from the data analysis based on the interviews and observations. The phenomena under study was how the social world influenced academic self-concept. The causal conditions that influenced the phenomena under study were pre-college characteristics, college experiences, and racial identity. Pre-college characteristics referred to the following categories: school experiences, social comparison, the Black
church, proving academic competence, “talking White”, and family support and sacrifice.

Two pre-college intervening conditions that shaped participants responses to the phenomena were identified: academic socialization and racial socialization.

Because the current research examined academic self-concept in the context of the university, the focus of the findings was on college experiences. College experiences consisted of several categories and sub-categories. They were significant others and the generalized other. The sub-categories of significant others were family with the following intervening conditions: pressure, responsibility, and support and friends, with the following intervening condition: support group with common goals. The sub-categories of the generalized other was stereotypes, with the intervening condition of proving academic competence, the Fellowship Program (being a Fellow), with intervening conditions of refuge, privilege, and reference group (social comparison), and social comparison, with intervening conditions of GPA and being a Fellow. Lastly, racial identity, a component of social self-concept influenced academic self-concept through its relationship with academic self-concept.

The consequence of participants’ responses to the phenomena under study was a positive academic self-concept with academics having a central part to self-definition. In addition, the meaning made of academics through race in participants lives emerged as a consequence. In other words, academic self-concept as defined with and through racial identity.
Pre-College Experiences

Participants entered college with a host of experiences that influenced how they experienced college. I begin by discussing participants pre-college academic self-perceptions in order to gain a deeper understanding of how participants viewed their academic abilities prior to attending college. This section is organized around the categories identified based on the data analysis. Participants’ experiences fell in the following categories: school experiences, social comparison, the Black church, proving academic competence, “talking White”, and family support and sacrifice and the following intervening conditions: academic socialization and racial socialization. I begin with a discussion of participants’ pre-college academic self-concept.

Pre-College Academic Self-Concept

Participants entered college with an academic self-concept shaped by their pre-college experiences. Consistent with the literature on high-achieving African American college students (Fries-Britt, 2002), many had advanced placement classes in high school, had one or both parents who were college educated, and attended private high schools or highly ranked public schools.

Based on the data collected, there were no substantive differences between the pre-college experiences of the sophomore and senior participants. These students did not become high-achieving in college; they entered the university with a positive academic self-concept shaped by their pre-college experiences. Participants consistently described themselves as being high-achieving prior to entering college.
Before I got to Penn State, I was a high achiever. I needed to do well. In my family I was, I was the smart one. I have a sister who’s a year younger then me. But she’s the athletic one. I was the smart one. So I was in the AP classes and, yeah I’ve always been in honors classes. That’s about it.

Angela, senior

All participants exhibited a high level of scholarship evidenced by their selection as Fellows. All of the students also enrolled in honors, advanced placement, or college courses while in high school. They all had a commitment to higher education from early on.

Pretty much my entire childhood leading up to high school I was very high-achieving. I, I would hardly accept anything below an A. You know I did, I was in gifted classes and you know advanced classes all through you know from the elementary school to high school. And you know a lot of extracurricular activities you know outside like in games and football, stuff like that. John, senior

For some, it was challenging to describe themselves as “smart”. These participants used words such as “hard working” or the “next best thing”. It appeared as if they did not want to come across overly confident about their abilities. They knew they were smart but they did not appear to want to be thought of as arrogant. For example, Zaire stated, “In high school…I thought of myself, not as the best but I guess the next best thing (laughing)”.

Students often described themselves as a nerd or bookworm. For these students this terminology was positive. They enjoyed being called an academic and enjoyed referring to themselves as such.

Before I got to Penn State, well, academically, I wasn’t, I’m not going to say, I was a nerd, I wasn’t the cliché nerd. I personally, I just, you know does work, reads books, go to school, that’s it. I did my work, I never read the book, I hate reading text books. All my information was just off my memory. Like academically, I played, I played [sports] four years, I did
other things, so school wasn’t a number one focus, besides school was so easy, it seemed like it was my number one focus. Greg, sophomore

It was important to participants that they be engaged in other activities outside of academics, as Greg indicated, he was a nerd but because he was involved in many co-curricular activities as were all participants, he did not believe that he fit the stereotypical “nerd” mold. Being involved in these outside activities appeared to give the students a balance between their academic and social worlds. Particularly for those participants who attended predominantly White high schools, being engaged in co-curricular activities with people not in their honors courses allowed them to socialize with other students of color.

**School Experiences**

Participants’ curricular and co-curricular experiences helped shape their academic self-concept. The influence of participating in organized sports emerged as an influence on academic self-concept. In addition, their experiences with external measures of validation such as grade point average and honors courses. In addition, organized sports

All of the students were very involved outside the classroom as well, holding leadership positions, participating in community service, or actively participating in sports. It was very important for them to be well-rounded students and this message was often reinforced by parents and teachers. Students also recognized the importance of
being involved in co-curricular activities as assisting them in getting into college and for their own personal edification.

Many students participated in sports in high school. Consistent with literature (Jordan, 1999), participation aided in their academic success and confidence. Those students active in spots, worked hard to dispel the stereotype that African Americans were only good in athletics and that they were not intelligent. They wanted to prove that they could be athletically and intellectually capable. The tie to sports also provided a larger Black social network as oftentimes the people they played sports with were Black and the people they took classes with were White. The ability to be successful in both arenas was important for many of the students.

Well since I was in sports, especially track, that, the team was predominantly Black and I interacted really well. Like you know they would sometimes joke around about there’s the smart one. But you know at the same time they would be asking me for help. Cierra, sophomore

It is interesting to note that for many students who actively participated, sports provided a means to connect with other African American students. This proved to be the case in particular for those students who attended predominantly White or diverse high schools where they were often the only one or one of few in their academic classes.

Sports seemed to be an equalizer and gained them entry to the Black community.

Like I got the smart Black kids if I could say that they were like if we, if anything we just our conversations were a little bit different than what the conversation was with the, the, the ghetto side ideal. Not that I have a problem, because I hung out with that ghetto side as much as I hung out with like the smart Black kids. We kind of all kind of meshed together. There was some Black kids that did not feel like they wanted to be a part of that. But predominantly why, there was, there was times when we all kind of meshed together because of sports and all of that ideas and, and all. Michelle, sophomore
Grades and honor classes

Other external measures of academic validation, such as class rank, GPA, awards, being in honors or advanced placement courses influenced academic self-concept. The more academic success achieved through awards and high grades, the higher the academic self-concept. Being in honors and AP classes made participants feel good. As Kevin stated, “I felt good because I felt like I, I, was, I guess I’m considered smart if I’m in those classes, so, I thought it was neat”. In addition, receiving awards gave participants a sense of accomplishment.

And so, we would get awards, like for honor roll or that type thing and I wanted to be like an honor roll and a scholar and that type thing, like I wanted to achieve every, every award possible and so that was my reference point for that, like the awards for high school, awards, plus, um, this one girl in most of my classes and she and I would just go at it academically to striving, like I got an A, I got an A too, what percent did you get, 92, I got a 95. Crystal, sophomore

The sense of being recognized by not only one’s peers, but also one’s teachers gave participants a strong sense of accomplishment and gave them something tangible by which to measure their academic success. Having this positive tangible measurement had a positive influence on their academic self-concept. For these participants knowing that others appreciated their effort and subsequently honored them because of their effort helped them know that they were in fact high-achieving and smart.

Social Comparison

To gain knowledge about their academic abilities, participants most often compared themselves to the other students in their classes. The comparison process most
often occurred among those who participants spent the most time with. As participants were usually the only person of color in their honors and/or advanced placement courses in high school, they compared themselves most often to Whites. Cierra, a sophomore, stated,

For some reason I find myself comparing myself to males. It was really weird, because most females like to compare themselves to other females. But I was actually comparing my standards to males because the only female I had myself to compare myself with at home is my mother and you just can’t compare to your mother. Academically. Like that’s basically what I did was their standards was how well were they doing on the tests? What were they saying, what were they writing you know comparing my, my literature, my language to theirs. Interestingly enough even though I was a minority for females there were actually a couple minorities for males in my class. But they weren’t the minority as in Black or Hispanic. They, there was a few Asian males and a few Jewish males. So that was interesting enough. I don’t, I don’t know why I compared myself to them because they had different views as well than I did. But I found myself comparing to them.

Cierra was typical of participants in that she compared herself to those students who were the top performers in the school. As most participants attended classes with predominantly White students, the comparison took place with Whites. Similarly for those students who attended predominantly Black schools or diverse schools, the comparison took place between top performers who in these instances were other African Americans or students of color. This leads to the belief that race may not play as integral a factor in the comparison process as does the proximity of the top performers.

Friends were very influential on participants’ academic self-concept. For example, the vast majority of participants had friends who were as, if not more, academically motivated and successful as they. As Antoinette stated, “We were all smart,
high-achieving, all made honor roll. All my friends”. Participants and their friends spent time doing homework together and kept each other motivated.

I guess we always did our homework together and we had these little friendly competitions. It wasn’t anything. It was just to motivate each other to, to see well, well what do you mean you didn’t get this grade? Well I got it. So maybe you should, you know what I mean? Stuff like that. So we like had little friendly competitions to motivate each other.
Antoinette, sophomore

While participants might have friends from their neighborhoods, the friends they most often spoke about as it related to academics were those friends from school who were similarly motivated. It was often to these friends that they drew their comparison.

Renee sums up this idea as she speaks of having friends from the “block” and friends from school.

I was just more motivated to do well in my schoolwork instead of just hanging out and you know, they were two years older than me, so I guess you know, boys and things like that became much of a distraction and that was I think it was a lot of my friends in high school, that I went to elementary school with. You know, I went to school for school. They went to school for boys, so from then on I knew that when I went to college, my friends there have to be on the same level as me and I think that. Not, as definitely motivated and focused on work, that they wanted to go to school, like college was very, very important to them. And I also thought if I hung around people like that it would help me to study, cause if people are studying, I’m like ok, I’m going to study, but at home, you know, my friends, they barely went to school, like they didn’t wasn’t to go to school, they didn’t want to go to college. It was their parents pushing to go to college. And I was the one bringing home the college applications. Now the ladies on my block, except for one who is actually up here now, who is definitely motivated and I talk to often, they didn’t continue with a college education. Some of them have children now and just two or three of them have children they are in school or graduating and not working, so it was kind of like a variety of things going on, but the girls that I grew up with from when I was two, we’re definitely on two different pages…Renee, senior
Renee’s experiences in this case of having two sets of friends was somewhat atypical from most participants. For the majority of participants, friends were from school, either from curricular or co-curricular activities. Most did not speak of having friends in their neighborhood, unless they attended a neighborhood school and most did not.

Some compared themselves academically to family members, such as a sibling or a parent. As participants tended to compare themselves to those who were academically successful with proximity being a determining factor, the comparison sometimes took place among family members. The roles that participants took in the family, meaning, you are the smart one, you are the athletic one, helped shape the academic self-concept of the participants. These labels that were attributed at a young age stuck with participants throughout their high school experiences and continued into college.

Probably my brother. And actually it was kind of weird, because I always thought that, I always thought that he was smarter than me and that he always did so much better than I did, but then like as I got older… but then as I like got older, my parents were like no, actually, like did better than him in math. Joanne, senior

In making the comparison to his parents, who were both engineers, Isaac feared that he would not measure up to their academic accomplishments. As a result of this fear he often self-sabotaged himself academically.

All the way until my junior of college, I self-sabotaged my grades, after I left home. I’ve always found ways to like, like, make sure that someone, make sure that teachers knew that I was bright. But not try as hard as I possibly could because if you try as hard as you possibly could, then you’re vulnerable. Because then if you don’t, aren’t perfect, then it’s like well you weren’t capable. Instead, if I’m not perfect, the teacher knows that I try, as hard as I could. The teacher knows that if I like I hand in the first five assignments late, just so I can make sure if I don’t get an A, we all know why. Even if I go perfect the last five assignments, it was like,
well, you never what you’re going to do. So I did that all throughout high school. Like, severely (chuckles). And then all throughout first year in college here. I think until about a year ago I was pretty much afraid to know what my intellectual ceiling was. Isaac, senior

Isaac’s notion of self-sabotage was atypical for participants in the study. He was the only one who spoke of not intentionally performing academically. Isaac stated that he self-sabotaged because he compared himself to his parents and was fearful of not measuring up to their academic accomplishments. This self-sabotage continued through his first year of college. Even though he intentionally would skip class and not turn in assignments, he still maintained a high GPA and received numerous scholarships and summer internships. The idea of self-sabotaging was unique to Isaac’s experience. All of the other participants worked very hard to achieve good grades. In Isaac’s case, he never mentioned feeling pressure from his family to be successful but he somehow believed that if he did allow his full academic potential to be unleashed, it would not measure up to what his parents accomplished.

A few participants compared themselves to their closest friends, who often were African American. They encouraged each other and saw it as a “friendly competition”. The participants who compared themselves to their closest friends were often in honors classes together. It is through being in classes together that they made this comparison and worked together to ensure each of their success.

It was probably my good friend, Marcus, the other African American male [in honors classes]. He was always like straight A’s all the time, straight A’s, and so I sort of tried to, that was motivation right there. If he’s getting straight A’s, I’m going to have to do something. You know, that rivalry or whatnot, so, I think I looked towards him a lot. Kevin, sophomore
These friendship groups not only provided a means of comparison, but also served as a means of support and encouragement. In talking about her best friend, Serena stated

She’s such a, she’s such an intelligent person and she’s such a strong person and she’s always been like that. Ever since I’ve know her she’s always been like that. She’s, she’s always such a hard worker and you know I sometimes catch myself slacking off a little bit. And then it’s like you know she’s doing well and I want to be up there with her. So I might as well you know give myself an extra push, push myself up there. So yeah she’s basically the reason for it. Serena, sophomore

The idea of having a support network of peers who were experiencing similar academic success and challenges as them, was very important for participants. As participants were often the only or one of few people of color in their schools and classes, having friends who were similarly academically motivated and successful served as a means of motivation, support, and encouragement. They were there to push each other to be successful and served as a means to measure their academic success.

While not typical of participants, Zaire relied on her spirituality and religious beliefs as she reflected on the social comparison process. For her, she made sense of her academic abilities not by comparing herself another person based on the fact that God gives people different gifts.

There’s this one girl, one of my friends Black female. I thought she was a genius because a lot of the times she didn’t have to do her homework and she didn’t have to run around looking crazy that I did. And she definitely you know the SATs, blew them out of the water you know exams, everything. I thought, I thought, I didn’t think she was prefect or anything but I, I just knew, I felt that she was smarter than me. But I became, I started looking at that as a gift you know. Not everybody learns the same way, not everybody learns at the same speed, and God gives everybody their own gifts. And I’m doing well with mine so I tried not to compare myself. But I wanted to be valedictorian. I wanted to be the top. I didn’t
achieve that goal. But I was very close to it, you know, and I was satisfied with that. Zaire, sophomore

As a result of viewing the comparison process in this manner, Zaire appeared to make sense and be comfortable with her own academic abilities. Having this religious belief allowed Zaire to focus on her own capabilities and be satisfied with herself while still acknowledging her friends’ academic success.

Interestingly, several participants moved during high school, and moving negatively influenced their academic self-concept through the comparison process. Going to a different school system and having to start over again after coming from a school where they were known to be at the top of the class made participants re-evaluate their academic abilities.

Moving to Maryland affected them [academic self-perceptions]. That’s really myself pushing, pushing myself and like people’s doubts and beliefs that I wouldn’t make it actually shaped my academic because I actually think that had they not had any doubts in me and they would have been all against me then I definitely don’t think I would have strived as hard. I think I would have been, you know, comfortable with being mediocre. Crystal, sophomore

Isaac was home schooled until high school and then attended a prestigious boarding school where he took college courses. In reflecting on his experiences in going from being one student to one of many he stated,

I dealt with that adjustment by working harder outside of the classroom to prove I was brilliant. But not, making sure I left no academic trace or footprint. I did a lot of self-sabotaging myself in grades. Just cause, I didn’t really care all that much as far as what the paper would show. I just wanted people not to think I was stupid. I wanted people not to think I was dumber, or less capable than they were. So from the mock trial to math modeling team, it was a national math…Like academically, my grades, mm, my grades weren’t so good. Isaac, senior
For others, the move offered less academic challenge. For example, John moved from New Orleans to State College in high school and regarding the academic challenges found, he stated,

I did do advanced classes. But I would have to say that the general challenge coming from Franklin to here it had lowered slightly. I did not feel as, as intimidated at all...Did I like the fact that it was a challenge and was lower? Not really. You know I, I just did my best work and you know it was just something I noticed but you know I don’t, I don’t think it really hindered me significantly. John, senior

Greg expressed similar sentiments in discussing his move from Kentucky to Pennsylvania. In Greg’s case as in John’s the school that they moved to was not as academically challenging as the school from which they moved. Greg stated that he was not challenged at all at the new school.

So it was a big comparison, but the school system was sub par compared to the school I’d come from. So, I basically just skated through high school. So to speak. You know, some people remember being back in high school and staying up doing papers weeks and weeks ahead of time and just getting it done like the day before, I wrote my research paper the night before it was due. I remember doing my graduation project, the one you couldn’t graduate without doing it, I was done the night before.

For those participants who moved and transferred to new schools, the impact that this had seemed to be great. Participants went from a place where they knew everyone and everyone knew them and their academic abilities to a place where they had to start over again, and in some instances, prove all over again their academic abilities.

**The Black Church**

An interesting finding was the role that God, spirituality, and the Black church had in participants’ lives. While this was not true for the majority of participants,
consistent with the literature (Berkel, Armstrong, & Cokley, 2004; McRae, Thompson, &
Cooper, 1999; R. J. Taylor, Lincoln, & Chatters, 2005; Walker & Dixon, 2002) a few
spoke about how the Black church served as a means of support and in particular, the
Black church in their hometown served as an extended family. The “church family” not
only provided spiritual support, but also supported students in their academic endeavors.
Although most did not attend religious services at the university, their church family at
home continued to provide support and encouragement all of which had a positive
influence on academic self-concept.

Everybody always was just proud of what I did in the church, everybody,
you know, “Oh, how are you doing in school? I know you’re doing well”,
you know so, it’s just little things like that, when I’ll do something small,
they won’t even know how I’m doing in school really at all, but they just
know, you know, “oh, you know, you’re Brenda and Victor’s kids, I know
you’re doing well”, you know. … ok, yeah, with my church family, um,
they always like I said, reinforced, you know, came up to me, “how you
doing in school?” and give me candies and things like that. Joanne, senior

Michelle had a situation in high school where she became extremely stressed. As
a result she became physically ill. She discussed how she handled the situation, relying
on her spiritual beliefs. How she dealt with this pressure was through her religious
beliefs. For Michelle, she stated, “I think in our household it was two things that
mattered: Jesus and education. And it’s been drilled into both me and my sister since we
were kids”.

And I think at that time it had to be I, I, I, I, I, and I’m a very, very, I have
a very religious person when it comes to my faith. I’m a Christian and all
that stuff. I got, my rationale is that it stopped being about everybody else.
It stopped being about God, it stopped being about the few people who
have helped me become who I am today. It started being about me and I
started putting all this pressure on me and it got to the point where I can’t
do that any more. I just got to let it go and let God, so that has been my
motivation for the last two years has been that ideal. Michelle, sophomore
As in their hometown, the “church family” at the university not only provided spiritual support, but also supported students in their academic endeavors. Although most participants did not attend religious services at the university, their church family at home continued to provide support and encouragement, which had a positive influence on academic self-concept. For the few that did participate in religious services at the university, it was a conscious decision and the church served as a home away from home.

I made a, I made a choice. Like when I got at Penn State, I had a choice like not to go to church. And some people who’ve been you know when it’s been drug down their throats since they were kids to go there, but I knew I was blessed. Like I just knew that I’m here because of this. I was not going to turn my back on it. So I decided to go to church. I go to church up here. And I go to church that’s way different than my church cause Black churches go for hours. The church I decided to go to is just an hour and a half. Michelle, sophomore

Even though the type of church that Michelle attended at the university was different from her church at home and is not a predominantly Black church, it serves the same purpose for her, that of spiritual support and fellowship along with an extended family system. Renee summed up the sentiment for those who attended religious service at the university.

I did not attend it [church] that much on campus but starting my junior year and presently I attend services every week and you know if I can’t make a week that’s fine. But I at least try to make it routine and set a time to go, go to mass. Every time I go home I go to mass with my mom. Just I just make it a routine to making it you know a part of my life because freshman and sophomore year I felt I had, I never had time to go. But I’m like no you have to make time. So I was more, become mature and realizing that I think the for me, to not be so stressful. You know taking the church as a support system also was, was very important to me especially when things were getting more stressful my junior and senior year. Renee, senior
When asked who influenced her academic self-perceptions, in addition to others, Zaire stated that God influenced her academic self-concept.

And the who would be God and my family. It’s, it’s so incredible how my family is always there for me, you know. And when I can’t talk to anybody else, you know God has always been there for me. He’s the one. And so that’s where I, I guess I find my strength when I’m struggling.

Zaire, sophomore

It was through their relationship with God and their involvement in the church, participants saw themselves reflected positively. Because of this, their academic self-concept was positively influenced.

**Proving Academic Competence**

Participants spoke of the importance of dispelling negative stereotypes and proving that they were intelligent and academically competent. A common theme for participants prior to attending college was that of “proving”. Participants felt the need to prove that they were academically capable, not only to people in the school, but to people in the community. For Black students at PWIs this is a common feeling (Feagin et al., 1996; Willie, 2003). As Zaire stated, “I, like I said I just didn’t want to be a statistic. I wanted to be one of those, you know,…minority students, if you want to say, that you know disputed all the odds, all the stereotypes, all of it”.

The idea of proving academic competence also manifested itself in the form of consistently encountering stereotypes from Whites about their academic capabilities. Greg’s experience with a co-worker’s disbelief about his college aspirations was typical of participants’ experiences.
Well, I started out working, I started out washing cars when I came in. But one of my co-workers, I told him how I had taken the SAT’s and all these colleges were sending letters to me. I told him how I got letters from Princeton and Yale and Harvard. I was like I might apply to Princeton, he was like why would you apply there, he was like, why would you apply there, like you know you probably won’t get in. I’m like, what are you talking about, I’m not getting in? He was like, come on now, do you really think you can get into a place like that? I’m like, yeah, I really do think I can get into a place like that. And he was like if you get in, it’ll be off like some minority quota or something like that. Greg, sophomore

While it might appear that having to prove their academic worth to others would have a negative impact on academic self-concept, this was not the case. Participants seemed to use this doubt to motivate them to be even more successful almost as if to say, “I’m going to prove you wrong”. Participants, with the exception of Isaac and his self-sabotaging efforts worked harder to show others that they were intelligent and that they deserved every academic honor that they received. The sophomores more so than the seniors in the study had the strongest desire to dispel negative stereotypes about African Americans. Very often, participants were the only African American person in their classes unless they attended a predominantly African American high school. Because of this, they often felt they were questioned on their academic abilities.

I was called a different Black [by a] White girl. We were sitting in health class and um she, well, she was getting to know me because I had just moved, so I was still known as the new girl and she said, oh well, you seem different. I said different how? And she was like, well do you listen to rap music? And I was like, um, I really listen to all kinds of music, but I guess not really, not that much. And um, she said, oh, she said, well, um, how are your grades or whatever. And I was like, odd question, but, good, I guess. And she was like, you’re a different Black. And so I said is that a good thing or bad thing? She was like, well, “I mean you speak really proper and I don’t know, you don’t, and um, you’re not ghetto.” And I was like, wow! I was like, ok, I’m like before I say something, I’m just going to walk away now. And then, I mean, that’s, that’s how I was. Either I was, it was like one of those things you weren’t Black enough or, you know, that type thing. I have Black friends I just, I started looking around
and I saw what she meant and that was the sad thing, like towards my senior year, we had a lot of African Americans move into our school and it was a group, like a group of us Black kids that were proper speaking, or did well academically and had or took AP classes and labeled like over achievers. And we looked around us and we saw the kids that are always in detention, the kids that are always cussing out the, like our school security and speaking completely improper that had attitudes and just like adding up to the stereotypes that all the other kids had already made and it was a shame, it was like disprove it, but.. Crystal, sophomore

Crystal, like so many students, recounted experiences of not quite fitting in with other African Americans in her school because of how she spoke and being viewed as atypical to Whites because of this.

“Talking White”

Participants talked of being teased for “talking White” and being labeled as “the White girl” by their Black peers. They also spoke of being called an “Oreo” by other African Americans. John spoke of a discussion held in one of his college courses that struck very close to home regarding the notion that because a “Black man is successful and speaks articulately and you know dresses like his peers that, that means that he is has assimilated completely and has essentially become White”. John did not agree with this and spoke of his personal experience with this idea of talking White.

I mean cause I sort of, I went through a period where I was ridiculed simply because I wanted to speak properly and I had, for some reason people would make fun of me for using “big words” (chuckles) and I didn’t think I had a really massive vocabulary or anything at all at the time. And in fact I thought it was insufficient (laughs) and it was like try to read the dictionary….But and, (laughs), yeah because I would always have to talk to my dad. But I don’t think my vocabulary is extensive enough. I guess because I was around him all the time and he’d always use terms that I was completely unaware of. And so and yeah and, and as a result people call me you know why are you trying to be White you know?
And all this Oreo kind of comments and that’s really not what I was attempting to do. I was trying to enhance my knowledge basically and be able to, to have more tools at my disposal in expressing myself. And that was not taken very well. Even, it was for a long time I had to, I had to deal with the vocabulary thing. And I still don’t think it’s you know sufficient.

Participants did not understand why they were being teased for using a large vocabulary or why people believed that they (participants) thought they were better than them. They were, in their minds, just speaking how they were raised or how their parents spoke. It was not about trying to be “White” or anything other than who they were and this was who they were. As John stated, it was not about thinking he was better than anyone else, he spoke as he spoke because, according to him, he had no alternate way of expressing himself.

Participants were also sometimes teased by other African Americans and called nerd, bookworm, or “one of those geniuses”. These terms were strictly related to participants’ academic performance and usually came from friends. In these instances, the teasing appeared to be more of a joke coming from their friends, with participants, in fact, liking the nicknames and the joking.

It was still joking. It was, it was nothing ever negative. They were you know, Renee, you know, I would say stuff, and you know, Renee just go read a book. Something like that. So it was just always something joking, like nothing bad, no negative meaning behind it all. Renee, senior

However when called “Oreo” or “White girl,” as it related to race, calling into question their “Blackness”, participants became offended. In our society, academic success is often associated with “acting White”. According to Tatum (1997), African American students who want to be academically successful often have this experience where “doing well in school becomes identified as trying to be White. Being smart
becomes the opposite of being cool” (p. 62). It was in these instances that participants fought hard to dispel negative stereotypes about African American people lack of intelligence by proving that they were academically capable. Students worked hard to prove their academic worth by obtaining high grades and by showing their intelligence through their classroom participation and co-curricular activities. Students did not succumb to the stereotype that being smart was not “cool”. They enjoyed being “smart” and wanted to make sure that others knew that they were intelligent.

They said that I talked different because I talked, I talked like a White girl which in my mind is just, like it wasn’t seen as a White girl talk, like the way I’ve always talked which with education, like an educated tone. So you know I didn’t have the whole Ebonics ghetto aspect of my life. So I was told that I wasn’t Black enough. These were other Black students in my classes. And I’m not really sure why they thought that I wasn’t Black enough and that I was portraying myself a White girl when they were in my same classes and they were . . . you know what I mean? They were just as smart as me. So how did I become this goody two-shoes girl when you now we were all the same. I didn’t understand it. Antoinette, sophomore

Although these students had these experiences prior to coming to college, they did not experience these same stereotypes at the university. It was primarily in high school that students experienced this conflict between academic self-concept and racial identity. For many, they were able to find a set of college friends who had the same high school experiences as them and who also were similarly motivated as them. They found comfort in being able to talk about their experiences being teased for “talking White” with others who were similarly teased in high school.
Family Support and Sacrifice

All participants consistently talked of how influential their parents and family were on their academic self-concept. Parents, as well as family members, immediate and extended, provided praise and support through positive academic socialization messages. This included stressing that education was critical and that students had an obligation to do well because of familial and historical sacrifices made. For example, Isaac spoke of why he had to do well academically, “Just that I better do well and the reason I better do well is because of all my parents’ sacrifices, and all my grandparents sacrifices and then all my historical cultural sacrifices”.

As is often found in the African American community, education was stressed as the key to being successful in society. As a result, many participants knew they were coming to college because of their family’s influence. This was true for all of the participants regardless of their socioeconomic status or whether they were a first, second, or third generation college student.

All of them [family members] have gone to college. So it’s not like I’m a first generation or even a second generation. It’s just something that we do and it’s not pressured. It’s just that well you know see that they made, it’s like these people made it through college and they’re fine. So you could, it’s not something that is impossible. That’s more of how it was.

Antoinette, sophomore

Participants described how their parents encouraged them to do the best they could and made sure their child understood that education was a priority. The idea of sacrifice was a strong theme in many of the participants’ lives, particularly as it related to getting the best education, whether it was parental or child sacrifice. In the case of Greg, he spoke of having to wake up at 4:00 am to go to the magnet school because his mother
wanted him to get the best education. In this case, Greg sacrificed going to a school that was 10 minutes from his home to making a three to four hour commute to school.

I started ninth grade there in Kentucky. So, you know, the magnet school’s on the other side of town. So I got in and I had to catch a, I had to get up at 4:00 in the morning to catch a city bus, bus terminal and catch a bus to school. So I could get there by 7, 8:00 when class started and I was in the band, so catching the bus back, it was, it was, non existent, I had marching practice after school. So if I didn’t [have the] money to catch the city bus back, I walked. Walking back home more often than not, that’s a couple hour walk. So, my mom was like, oh it’s for the best, you’re going to the school because it’s going to prepare you so much for college. All my friends they go to the [other] school, which was, if I walked from my house to the school I was supposed to go to, it would take me 10 minutes. Yeah, I’m like, is this really worth it, you know to go to this totally snobby school, and I thought all high schools were the same. So my mom, she stressed that it was important to have like a good forever start in life and everything, so going to a better school, she always wanted me to go the best school. Greg, sophomore

In line with the theme of sacrifice, Renee spoke of the financial sacrifices that her family made so she could get a good education. She acknowledge the fact that her parents made decisions about her education and that these decisions affected the financial fortitude of the family. While not overtly stated, it appears that participants recognized these sacrifices that their family had to make and in some instances that they made to get the best possible education. As a result of this acknowledgement and appreciation of these sacrifices, participants knew that they had to work hard in school and be academically successful because of these sacrifices.

Right, because many of my friends, they were in public school that were in my neighborhood, but my parents, I would say sacrifices, like getting a car or a family vacation to make sure that we were in Catholic school at least until we went to college. That was very, very important to my parents because they just believed in the Catholic education and the Catholic school system. Renee, senior
Parents also positively influenced participants’ academic self-concept through other activities such as fighting to make sure their child was academically challenged in school. In recalling her experience in not being part of a gifted and talented program.

Both Jazz and Michelle spoke of their mother’s (both teachers) determination to make sure that they were in accelerated classes.

You had to be recommended by your teachers. I was a good student. I worked hard…. And so for me it was just you know I was always a reader and school came easy to me. You know I don’t think it was a big problem and, and if I didn’t do my homework or if I missed class or anything I would have to deal with my mom and my mom’s scary. And I just didn’t like dealing with her. So she, but she was the one that would go to the teacher’s and be like why isn’t my daughter in this? Why isn’t my, cause she knew that, that I was smart enough to be involved in these organizations. Michelle, sophomore

The idea of having to “fight” for their child’s education was common. This notion of fighting for the best possible educational opportunities came in different forms, whether it was making sure that their child was placed in the highest academic track at the school or making sure their child was exposed to all of the academic opportunities, both curricular and co-curricular that they could be involved with. Jazz spoke of being placed in a lower academic track in middle school and her mother “fighting” for her to be in a higher track.

At first I was put in a lower track and my mother, she, she fought that and they put me, they put me in the accelerated program. So yeah. No I just, I was, I’m the type of person that’s like if they give it to me, I was like oh it’s, it’s okay mom. But mommy was just like no. She’s like I know your potential and that’s not you. So she, she would fight for me. She, it’s really hard to go back to that. But she, all I know is that she went to my school and she, she spoke, she spoke to somebody. I wasn’t allowed, I wasn’t around during like any of these sessions. But she, she got me placed. She, she I think she called the, I think she called my junior high school, told them my scores and how I’ve been doing in elementary school. And from there they put me in the accelerated program. Jazz, sophomore
The notion of parents sacrificing for the sake of their child’s education was also
evident through the fact that some parents moved their family so that their children could
obtain a better education. In speaking of why his family moved from New Jersey to
Kentucky, Greg stated

What was behind that, well, that was, basically my mother was tired of
you know having to work long hours, not seeing her children, and still
like, the electricity was getting cut off, the phone was getting cut off, those
things were still getting cut off even though she was working all these
long hours to try and pay the bills and we were taken out of school. She
didn’t want us to go to Trenton public schools at all. So, you know,
basically spent long chunks of time out of school at that time too, before
she finally decide, cause when we got taken out of public, uh, private
school, it took her long time to finally say, ok, I’ll send you guys to public
school now. Couldn’t afford private school, she didn’t want to send us to
public school, she was always just waiting on you know, whatever
overtime check to pay for the private school to put us back in, but then
more bills would come in. and she was just, tired of, you know living that
way. Not seeing her children and everything….So, when we got there, all
we had was us, it was just us, just us, the clothes on our back. So, my
mother had to be extra strong for us. Greg, sophomore

While Greg was the only participant who spoke of moving to another state, other
participants spoke of their parents moving to different parts of the city or state in an effort
to find better schooling or even sending their child to private schools. Parents seemed to
want to make things better for their child and afford them opportunities that would
enhance their lives and experiences and this was most often done through the educational
setting.

Parents also reinforced the importance of academics by selecting religiously
affiliated schools or home schooling because the school system did not mesh with the
family’s values or expectations. For example, Donna’s parents made a conscious decision
to send her to a Baptist school up to first grade because it was important that she get an
education with a spiritual base and “learn by example”. Similarly, Isaac’s family selected home-schooling as an option because they could not find a school that meshed with their Southern Baptist religious beliefs.

Through all of these activities, students received clear messages that academics was important. Through the perceptions of parents about their child’s academic abilities as well as the perception of the role of academics, students knew that they were intelligent and that they must succeed academically. Literature points to the fact that parents and family members appear to be one of the primary sources of influence on African American students and this proved to be the case for participants (Fries-Britt, 1998; Hrabowski III et al., 1998; Sampson, 2002). While most of the participants had parents who had a college or advanced degree, regardless of the parents’ educational level, the message was consistent, academics was the key to success.

**Academic Socialization**

Prior to and continuing in college, students received clear messages about academics and the role of academics in their lives. This academic socialization (messages about the role academics should play in their lives) from family members influenced the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students. Students received strong and clear messages from family members that academics is the key to success and that education is a priority. Most have internalized these messages as they were striving to be successful academically, seeing academics as a “job” and as central to their self-definition.
When asked what meaning academics had in their lives, participants often recalled the messages received from family members (and occasionally teachers) growing up. Students had internalized the message that academics was critical for their future success and that they must take advantage of the opportunity to attend college on an academic fellowship. These academic socialization messages were communicated in a number of ways, but the message was always the same, that succeeding is the only way.

Academically I’m a person who studies, studies, studies for an exam ‘cause I’ve always want to strive to do well. I got that way from my parents who taught me that it’s important to have an education, the best education possible. Serena, sophomore

While family members often communicated these messages overtly, participants also received these messages through the actions of family members. For example, seeing parents complete their college education influenced participants positively.

It took my mom a very long time to get her degree her bachelor’s degree. I think it took her 10 years, maybe longer than that so she really really stressed the importance of education and even though my dad didn’t have a college degree, he was there to back her up Donna, senior

It was through the actions of their parents going to college as an adult that participants recognized the importance of getting a college education, realizing that their parents were able to obtain their college degree while working and raising a family, participants knew that they should be able to be academically successful as well. Crystal spoke of how proud she was when her mother received her college degree.

Proud. I was proud of her. I mean, she was raising me by herself, going to classes, still had a full time job and everything and when I was younger, I couldn’t appreciate that, I mean like I never really understood, it was just like, mommy what do you mean you have homework to do? That type thing, or, how come I have to spend the night at grandma and grandpa’s house? That type thing, why can’t you do homework with me here? Cause I would just be running around the room and she’d be like, Crystal, really,
just sit down and be quiet. I mean like now, I see what she means with silence, but I just knew I was proud of her because I knew, well it took her six years with all if it, I think or five years, with it all, so, I just remember like, that was a really long time, well I’m proud of you, so, I was really proud and I just clapped and clapped and clapped. um, when she had her degree and hung it up on the wall. I remember that. Um, I mean she’d have awards from like her job and stuff, but, I mean, it was just one of those, every time I’d pass through the hallway and see that, it’s like, I’m gonna have one too, so, I think that’s what, I think that’s what it was.

Parents often did not have to say anything; participants just observed their behavior and learned. Often it was these subtle messages that participants recognized and subsequently put into action in their lives.

I don’t know. It was just, it was just sort of expected you know. I mean they didn’t have to pound it into me every day. I was just surrounded by so many people who were you know beyond college educated. You know and, and stayed within the whole academic system and you know taught, you know taught. So I pretty much grew up on a college campus academically. So you know it was pretty much the theme (laughs). John, senior

Participants spoke of feeling “pushed” and “pressured” to succeed in life. Family members would encourage participants to get higher grades, and in some instances, giving them extra homework to do so that they would be academically prepared in the classroom. This push to excel in academics was very common and is now appreciated; however; at the time the push was occurring, participants did not fully understand or appreciate what their family members were doing.

My dad he’s always pushing me, and pushing me and pushing me which eventually got annoying because, you know, I’d get all As and maybe one B and he’d flip out on me. You can do so much better than this, so much better than that. And I, I eventually see now the push was good. But at that time you’re young and you know you’re trying your hardest and you really don’t need that push because you’re going through so much already. So I would have to say that it would get annoying but I, now in retrospect I see that it was good for me just to push. Serena, sophomore
Pressure to be successful was a common theme. Greg spoke of this, as the oldest child in his family; he felt pressure to be successful, getting the label as the “leader of his generation” in his family.

So, I’m the leader of my generation’s family. I was the first grandchild, my grandmother and the first, and the first child out of her children, so I have to, I was always, everyone would talk to me like I gotta go and do it…. well, because, you know you can only mess up so many times in family, you know, the same things keep happening, and my family is not a family that’s dumb, it’s like everybody in my family is exceptionally gifted. But it seems as if people don’t recognize because of the choices they make in life, so you know, it’s even if, three generations down it’s like we finally gotta get this right. So, they’re on me, and me, I have to be on my little brothers, my little brothers now that I’m in college, I try to get on my little brothers, but they are still pushing me, like they get mad at me for not calling home, talking about how I’m doing in school. Greg, sophomore

Through the academic socialization of family members, participants received messages that they were expected to be academically successful and that academic success was the only option. These messages were most often communicated subtly through the observation of family member’s actions such as returning to college as an adult. They were also communicated more overtly where participants were told that they must be successful. As a result, participants felt pressure to succeed academically.

**Racial Socialization**

A pre-college factor that influenced academic self-concept and continued to influence academic self-concept while in college were the racial socialization messages participants received from family members. Racial socialization referred to the messages African American adolescents received when growing up about managing racism,
cultural pride, and spirituality from their primary caregiver (Stevenson et al., 2002). While racial socialization messages can fall in several categories (i.e., cultural coping with antagonism, cultural pride reinforcement, cultural appreciation of legacy, cultural alertness to discrimination, and cultural endorsement of the mainstream), most of the messages recalled by respondents in this study fell in the category of cultural alertness to discrimination. In other words, participants knew that “Basically if you’re a minority, you have to work harder and you can’t settle for less. You have to look for every opportunity” Kay, sophomore.

The idea of having to work twice as hard to succeed was prevalent in the majority of participants as they reflected on the racial socialization messages received from family members. In addition to knowing that as an African American person they must work twice as hard, they also received messages related to their gender and race. For example, as an African American man and an African American woman they have two strikes against them. Serena and Leroy shared this sentiment.

Ever since I was born going through high school I mean in middle school, elementary school he’s always told me you know get a good education because you know you are African American and a woman in this society. And you have a double you know double I don’t want to say double standard, but you know you know you have two strikes against you in this world. So you need to work twice as hard as anyone in order to achieve. Serena, sophomore

My mama would always say that as a Black man you got to work twice as hard to get anywhere. And she would say that a lot…. Like any, any time I screwed up…. But my dad would always say on the other hand you can do anything you want if you just put your mind to it. So I guess I always thought that I could do whatever I wanted. And my mama always told you have to work twice as hard….I realize, I’ve, as a grownup I’ve realized that it does take harder work because I don’t have the advantages that other people have had and throughout life and like with school and academics, like they’re exposed to a lot more than I was exposed to. Other
things I had to just pick up along the way. So it has taken more work.
Leroy, senior

In addition to receiving messages about working twice as hard, some participants received messages about embracing all cultures. This was particularly true for those participants who were biracial or who had siblings who were biracial. For example, Greg received messages that he must work twice as hard, but because he had two brothers who were “half White”, he also received messages about the importance of embracing all races.

Like it was like, you know you’re Black, you gotta work hard and everything. Where after she got in college, she was like you gotta work harder than any Caucasian person you ever meet in your life and you have to you know, what you do, is basically gonna be a representation of your entire race to a good many people that you meet. So that’s the underlying message that I got from a lot of my family members, especially my grandmother. Greg, sophomore

Several participants were also keenly aware of the importance of their legacy as an African American person in America. The message was that participants must always be aware of their history. This message was often communicated through academic pursuits or in the school setting.

But it was always, it was always keep, keep in mind where you came from. It, it was basically one of, one of those things. Like I, she [my mother] always, she never let me forget my roots. Like any time I had a project or anything she’s like oh why don’t you do it on Black history or something? Or in elementary school one of the issues with my sixth grade teacher was the fact that, was the fact that we didn’t celebrate . . . we didn’t really celebrate Black history month as we should have and with the Hispanic side, although my father is not in the picture, she would still, she would still let me go to my grandparent’s house and learn about my country from them. Jazz, sophomore

John’s father was once a Black Panther and very involved in the Black Power movement. Reflecting on how his fathers past affected him, he stated
[I] Didn’t really know him at that point but he certainly brought that sense of understanding the struggle into the household. And so you know I didn’t grow up thinking okay everybody’s colorless whatever or you know. You know I, I understood history from, from that, from that viewpoint…. And you know, he really instilled in me the necessity to, to come back and you know help, help, help the community…. I mean I always got the sense that you know I sort of have this responsibility you know to do my very best as in, and in the end come back and you know mentor or you know help out in any way I can. That’s, that’s really the, the sense I got.

In addition, for those participants who received messages about legacy, it was not only about African American people in general but about their parent’s immediate legacy. For example, John also spoke of how his father always told him that he had to be more “so much more credentialed than his peers to be even considered for a certain position. And you know that’s how it’s been almost his entire life”. Hearing this seemed to influence how they thought about race and success

For most participants racial socialization messages focused on being aware of discrimination and the fact that racism exists. Interestingly, for many, the academic and racial socialization messages were intricately linked. Participants received messages about the importance of education such that having a good education and performing well academically was the overarching key to success. Donna succinctly summed up this sentiment,

It was just because they [my parents] really, really emphasized education as key to success and, you know if you know how to write well and you know how to speak well, your race isn’t going to be a factor or it shouldn’t be a factor in whether or not you get to reach the goals that you set for yourself. Donna, senior

Both the academic and racial socialization messages not only influenced students prior to entering college, but also continued to influence them while in college. Students
drew on the messages learned to assist them in their lives at the university. While the messages were not communicated as strongly now, for most, they were internalized and were called up as they moved through their daily lives.

Participants entered college with a positive academic self-concept shaped by various influences. These included school experiences, social comparison, family support and sacrifice, and for a small number, the Black Church. In addition, the themes of proving academic competence and “talking White” emerged as influential on academic self-concept. Lastly, the academic and racial socialization messages received from family members prior to entering college served as a lens through which participants responded to their college experiences. While these socialization messages were not communicated as strongly once in college, they continued to influence all of the participants’ college experiences.

**College Experiences**

The current research focused specifically on how the social world influenced the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students. Within the university setting, several factors influenced academic self-concept. For the most part, all of these influences helped students maintain a positive academic self-concept.

People get a sense of who they are and what they are like by relying on the social world. Two social processes that are important in gaining this knowledge are reflected appraisals (from significant and generalized others) (Cooley, 1902/1998; Mead, 1934) and social comparison (Festinger, 1954/1989; Marsh, 1993). People gain knowledge
about themselves based on their perceptions of what others think of them. These reflected appraisals come from significant others, which refers to other individuals. They also come from the generalized other, which refers to the society and culture in which one lives. In other words, what people think of themselves is not only influenced by particular individuals, but also by groups of individuals and society. Social comparison refers not only to whom students compared themselves to in order to gain knowledge about their academic abilities, but also refers to the external measures participants use to gain knowledge about their academic abilities, such as grades and honors. Each one of these social processes influenced both the social and academic self-concepts of high-achieving African American college students.

Based on the analysis of the data, there were several causal conditions that influenced academic self-concept and intervening conditions that shaped participants’ response to how the social world influenced academic self-concept within the context of the university setting. The causal conditions were significant others in the form of family, with intervening conditions of pressure, responsibility, and support and friends, with the intervening condition of support group with common goals; the generalized other in the form of stereotypes, with the intervening condition of proving academic competence; and the Fellowship Program (being a Fellow), with intervening conditions of refuge, privilege, and reference group (social comparison); social comparisons with intervening conditions of grade point average and being a Fellow; and racial identity.

The consequence of participants’ responses to the phenomena under study was a positive academic self-concept with academics having a central part to self-definition. In addition, the intersection and meaning made of academics through race in participants
lives emerged as a consequence. In other words, academic self-concept as defined with and through racial identity. The following section is organized around these categories, beginning with college academic self-concept.

**College Academic Self-Concept**

Consistent with the literature on high-achieving African American college students (Fries-Britt, 2002), participants entered college with exceptionally high school grades and SAT scores. In high school, many took advanced placement classes, had one or both parents who were college educated, and attended private high schools or highly ranked public schools. All participants had very positive academic self-concepts characterized by a sense that they knew they were smart and high-achieving. Angela, also a Schreyer Honors student, was typical of participants’ academic self-perceptions.

> Academically I’m a high achiever. I don’t know. I’m in the honors college. So academics is a very big part of my career here at Penn State. How’d I get there? I guess how I worked in high school, support from my parents, and you know really good advisors and people here at Penn State that helped me move along my way. Angela, senior

Across the board, with the exception of one participant, academic self-concept has not changed since enrolling in college. Participants knew they were smart and high-achieving in high school and continued to believe that about themselves once in college.

> My perception of my academic ability from high school to college hasn’t changed. I know that if I work hard I can do well at anything that, anything where there’s an average, I can always beat the average. And the higher, the harder the class is and the better the students are, that will raise the average, so I just have to work harder to beat the average…And so beating the average comes very easily. But I put in my best work. Isaac, senior
Participants were able to learn from previous experiences in helping them to become academically successful. This proved to be particularly true for senior participants who were able to learn from previous academic mistakes.

Who am I academically since I’ve been at Penn State? Academically I think I am an assertive student when it comes to my studies. And I’ve really just learned that from experience my freshman year I wasn’t as assertive because things were given to me more often. Like being in Pennypacker there were like tutors in my building. Things of that sort. I, there was always an advisor looking for me. Whereas you know my sophomore and my junior year there was no one to do that. So I kind of had to learn on my own to go to professor’s office hours and to seek help maybe in the chem., chemistry help lab or you know make an appointment with my advisor on my own accord. Academically I think I do okay. When I’m thinking about how I’m doing compared to other students I think I’m, I’m, I’m faring pretty well. Donna, senior

As participants advanced in their academic careers, they were able to learn from past mistakes and therefore enhance their academic experiences. For some, their academic abilities had been tested, meaning that they had to put more effort into their academic pursuits. Even though this was the case, they still had very positive academic self-concepts and have generally succeeded academically in college.

My academic ability has definitely been tested since I’ve been in college, cause everything came easy to me in high school. But I think I’ve tested pretty well, I’ve had some discrepancies here and there, but I mean that’s normal, but overall my academic ability, I’d say it was pretty up there. Serena, sophomore

Crystal was an exception among participants in that she was the only participant who stated that her academic self-concept had lowered since high school. All other participants indicated that their academic self-concept remained the same. For Crystal, having a GPA lower than excepted caused her to doubt her academic abilities (she had a
GPA of 3.03 and desired a 3.5). Even though Crystal indicated that her academic self-concept had lowered from high school, it remained very positive.

**Significant Others**

The reflected appraisals of significant others or particular individuals influenced the academic self-concept of participants. Based on the analysis of the data, two categories of significant others, family and friends, emerged as influential.

**Family**

Participants indicated that family influenced academic self-perceptions. This most often took the form of pressure, responsibility, and support. In addition, academic and racial socialization messages received from family members prior to entering college were very influential, the majority of messages being sent prior to college. Although this was the case, these messages continued to influence all of the participants’ experiences and their academic self-concept.

**Pressure and responsibility**

The themes of pressure to be successful and a subsequent sense of responsibility to be academically successful were very strong for participants. Participants felt that they had to be academically successful and do well in school and in life because of the expectations of family members. There was a sense that they had to be successful
because they could not let others down. As Greg stated, “I do, I feel pretty pressured to
do good, well do well here in school, cause it’s nothing like going home, saying, well
mom, I kind of blew it, the scholarship’s gone”.

For many the idea of pressure was closely linked to having a sense of
responsibility to succeed. This was particularly true for participants who had younger
siblings. It was important for participants to set a good example for others. In addition,
knowing that others were expecting them to do well served as a motivating factor.

But, you know, I got broad shoulders, so they place the responsibility on
me because they knew I could handle it. And I just, I just know I can’t,
when you go through life with a purpose, like you know that what you’re
doing is not just for yourself. You’re more inclined to do it. Because I just,
if I was just here, you know for myself, I don’t have anybody back home
looking for me to succeed, you know, I could get up and go to class
whenever I felt like it. I’d go in to class 5 minutes before it ended. And not
care. But, I know that there are people back home, like my little brothers
that are going to be going through this soon. I got to show them the right
way to do it. Greg, sophomore

Having this sense of responsibility helped participants stay focused on their goal
to succeed academically. Because of this, they knew that they had to do well in school
and not do anything that would cause their academic performance to decline, particularly
because a drop in grades could mean losing the Fellowship. This message was received
through the academic socialization messages previously discussed, as well as form the
Fellowship Program.

I guess the fact that now a lot of pressure is on me. If I want to succeed
there’s nobody here telling me to do this or do that… I guess the probably
because the fellowship I have to have a 3.0 to keep my money. And if I
don’t keep my money then I wouldn’t be able to afford it. So I just do the
work. Leroy, senior
While the relationship that each student had with his or her family was distinct, all of the students reported extremely supportive and encouraging parents and families. Antoinette summed it up when asked who has contributed the most to her academic self-perceptions. She stated, “I guess my family. Just their support”. The family support received in college was an extension of the support participants received prior to coming to college. Knowing that their family was supportive and encouraging of them academically positively influenced their academic self-concept. All of the participants discussed how important their family was to them and how important their support was to them. In addition, all participants perceived their family as seeing them as high-achieving and academically capable.

My family still is very much my support system here even though I don’t see them all the time. But I talk to them plenty. I call my parents at least every other day. There’s always something new to tell them. They’re really supportive of the things that I get into academically and extracurricular. Like they’ll come to see my dance performances and you know things like that. So they’re just, they’ve just been really, really encouraging. But at the same time they’ve you know they’re always checking on me, are you sure you’re not doing too much? You know cause I like to put a lot on my plate (laughs). Donna, senior

Consistent with the literature on the importance of family for the academic success of students (Fries-Britt, 2002; Hrabowski III et al., 1998; Sampson, 2002), parents, in particular, served as a major influence for these students. All of these students had very positive experiences with their families when it came to academics.

Since I’ve been in college, basically my parents, they’re my support system. If I get overloaded or overwhelmed I call them and they tell me to calm down. If anything happens we got your back. So, like they’re always there. And basically I probably would have never been here if it wasn’t for
them. Because they tell me to keep, stay strong, make the grade, they help
with finances, and they give you a roof over your head and everything
else, so they were the most important people. Kay, sophomore

Participants relied on their family to give them emotional support. This was very
similar to their pre-college experience. The difference once in college however was that
family members where not there everyday to give that support. Participants
communicated with family members regularly. For some this meant a daily conversation
and for others it meant a weekly conversation. However, what remained consistent was
that there was frequent communication and constant support and encouragement. Having
this closeness to family members, knowing that they could go family members regardless
of what was occurring in their lives academically, allowed participants to continue to see
themselves reflected positively. It also gave them the encouragement to continue when
they felt that their grades were not where they desired them to be or when they were
facing challenges.

Mainly just support and definitely support. Just anything that I ever need,
you know. Whenever something’s getting on my nerves, I call them, you
know, if my computer isn’t working, I can just call them and whine and
complain, cause I need that sometimes, I just like to complain and whine
and have somebody listen and say ok…So, yeah, and then I just want to
make them proud, so I always have to feel like I have to get good grades
so I can go home and tell them what I do, and they’re like oh ok. Joanne,
senior

The way participants responded to the pressure of being academically successful
and the responsibility of showing other family members was influenced by the support
and socialization messages received pre-college. In the case of participants in the current
research, their response to pressure was to work hard to make their family proud. It was
as if they knew that the pressure to be successful and the responsibility they had to achieve meant that they were in fact smart and high-achieving.

**Friends**

Participants spoke of the importance of having friends at the university who shared common experiences, goals, and aspirations as being very influential. For the majority of participants, friendships stemmed from their experiences living in the residential component of the Fellowship Program. Through these experiences, participants identified a support group of people who shared common academic goals.

Support group with common goals

Having supportive friends who were equally academically successful and motivated had a positive influence on academic self-concept because they saw themselves reflected positively in their friends. For the majority of participants, their core set of friends came from students they met their first year in Pennypacker. These students were most often other students of color and, even for the seniors, it is with this group of friends that they remained closest. This group of friends provided support and motivation.

But I think it’s been good, you know since it actually it introduces you to a group of friends like right off from the bat cause you’re all living in the same building and you can all talk about oh when’s the next [Fellowship] meeting and stuff. So you automatically have friends like from that first day. Jazz, sophomore
Research speaks of the isolation that high-achieving African American college students at PWIs experience (Fries-Britt, 1998; Willie, 2003). For participants having a support group of other students who were racially and academically similar to them was critical. For some, this set of friends was different from friends that they had in high school.

My friends here at school I guess I was, they’re totally different than my friends at home. And my friends here are on the same exact track as I am. So you know if I was walking into the apartment I see them studying I’m like wait you study too. So I would say my friends play a major role in their future goals and career planning also influences you know what I’m doing and vice versa. So we motivate each other in a way. Renee, senior

In some ways, the support group formed from friendships served as an extended family and provided the support and encouragement that participants received from family members prior to entering college. In this case, friends almost serve as a surrogate family for participants.

Everybody knows when somebody has a test, you know, cause usually we study together for that. And I like the fact that I’ll come home and just, my roommates would be like, you know, how was your test today? Cause that’s how my mom was back home. So we all do that for each other. And we talk our teachers, we talk about our work. Joanne, senior

Donna expressed her experiences with friends who were not as academically focused as she as having a detrimental influence on her academic experiences. As a result of these experiences, she has learned to avoid those people who would be a negative influence on her academic experiences and has learned “how to find people who are similarly motivated and take advantage of that”.

I think some of the friends I have made have hindered me. Their focus, a lot of times their focus wasn’t the same that mine was academically. And I really just had to learn how to say no. No I’m not going out on Tuesday night or you know just you know taking the time what needs to be done,
done. And then having my fun later instead of having fun now and letting everything else sit.

Renee also spoke of being able to form friendships with people who had similar experiences to her in high school. She was labeled as “acting White” because she was considered the “smart girl” in high school. She told the story of how she felt as if she did not fit in while in high school and then coming to the university and finding friends who shared similar pre-college experiences as she.

Well in high school, at first it was a little, I was a little upset, because I’m like wow, I don’t fit in. Like I don’t, I didn’t sit at the Black table at lunch, but I did I didn’t sit at the White table either, I sat at the student council table. So you know, after a while, I realized, you know, I’m not choosing sides, I’m not picking sides. I’m just you know, you have to talk about these issues that are going on in our school community, I have to sit with them. And I liked sitting with them. And it was like I said, it was a diverse table, with Black girls and White girls. But, I think, I just got over it. I’m just like, I’m sorry, I don’t you know, I don’t talk ghetto, I don’t understand how you talk Black. So, I think I would make fun of it when someone said something to me and then I would start talking ghetto and then they’d be like oh, I’m sorry I said that. I’m like, yeah, I’m sorry I don’t talk like that. But, um, it’s something that I kind if got over. I mean especially in college, I mean all my friends talk the same way and had much of the same experience as me, so I think that’s the one thing that brought us even closer because we had the same type of high school experiences of being labeled as the smart girl, or you’re acting White or something like that or you talk that way. So you know, this is how we are, yeah.

Seeing and forming relationships with other high-achieving students of color who were similarly academically focused had a positive influence on academic self-concept, particularly since many high-achieving African American college students were the only person of color in their high school honors and advanced placement classes. This was especially important for those students who attended high schools that were not predominantly Black.
Participants indicated that significant others most notably in the form of family and friends influenced academic self-concept. Through the support of family members and the pressure to be successful instilling a sense of responsibility, participants saw themselves reflected in a positive academic light. In addition, friends served as a support group that shared common goals. This proved to be particularly influential, as many participants did not have this experience in high school.

**Generalized Other**

The generalized other refers to the society and culture in which one lives. Based on the data analysis, two categories of the generalized other emerged, that of stereotypes and the Fellowship Program (being a Fellow).

**Stereotypes**

The reflected appraisals of the generalized other appeared in the form of stereotypes for participants. Participants worked hard to prove their academic competence in the face of negative stereotypes about their academic abilities. These stereotypes most often came from peers at the university.

Proving academic competence

Consistent with pre-college experiences, sophomores more so than seniors continued to work to prove that they were academically talented, that they deserved to be
at the university, and that they deserved to be Fellows. The desire not to be a statistic and
to dispel stereotypes was strong, but not as strong as it was prior to coming to college.

Students attempted to prove people wrong and dispel stereotypes by maintaining
academic excellence and not behaving in a manner that would give people a reason to
doubt them solely because of race. This behavior included behaving in a manner that
would not draw negative attention to them such as getting in trouble with the law or any
behavior that conformed to negative stereotypes about African Americans. This was
consistent with literature on African Americans at PWIs and their desire to prove
themselves (Feagin et al., 1996; Willie, 2003).

I think as a Bunton-Waller Fellow it’s up to me to set an example towards
the rest of the campus that you know just because I’m a minority doesn’t
mean that I’m here for a sports scholarship and that you know I’m not, the
only reason why I didn’t get my scholarship was just because I was Black.
It’s important to get that information known to other people. Cierra,
sophomore

Participants were very aware that people might think that they were at the
university because of affirmative action. The idea that people thought this about them
made the participants want to prove that they deserved to be at the university even more.

Michelle’s experience with a discussion on affirmative action in one of her classes
demonstrated this notion. She stated that a “White boy in one of her classes said, “Well
aren’t you here because of affirmative action?” and asked if she was ashamed because of
this.

At the time I felt, I felt that the only, they looked at me and for the first
time and I’m used to being in an all school, I’m used to being the only
Black person in the class. But for the first time I felt that I was being,
when people look at me the only thing, they didn’t think that I was smart,
they didn’t think that I deserved to be here. They just thought that I was
here cause of a government law. And I’m not saying that I’m not going
against affirmative action. But I’m just saying that I’m here because I’m smart. I’m here cause I earned this grade. Even if I wasn’t Black I’d still be here. My grades were good enough in high school I deserve, I deserve to be here. And I was like and most people, most African American minorities are here because they deserve to be here. Their, the Penn State would not have let these kids in without having the right, you know, good enough grades to come here. Doesn’t mean that they’re not going to, they’re going to succeed or fail. It’s like we’re not here because I’m, and look I’m just kind of messing up my words now because at the time I was just so upset. And I just wanted to put my head down and go like you know go away. But I knew that if I put my head down I felt like they were going to win, they were going to beat me. The TA was just going off about oh they probably didn’t get the same grades as you did. I wanted to tell them my GPA from last semester. I was like well you know what I got and blah, blah, blah. I didn’t feel that was necessary. I think that it’s overkill. But yeah, I wish I said it though. Michelle, sophomore

As Michelle recounted her experience, which was a typical experience for participants regardless if others knew they were a Fellow or not, she became increasingly animated, as if she were reliving what occurred. When asked what she did as a result of this incident, she replied,

I made sure I got an A in that class. I didn’t take any, not that I wasn’t going to. But I made sure that I studied my butt off. I mean I was on anger now. I’m like this is what stressed, this is my grade blah, blah, blah. I wanted that girl to give me my A and I earned it. Not because I’m Black or White. Because I got that grade cause I earned it.

Participants therefore proved themselves by making sure that their grades were high. There was a sense of feeling as though they had to prove themselves, but not wanting to because “proving something takes a lot out of you”. Despite feeling like this, participants continued to work hard while still maintaining a positive academic self-concept.

I just think that in some cases we have to prove ourselves over and over again until everyone kind of accepts the fact that we’re on equal footing with everybody else and at that time I was, I wanted to go off. I was like
seriously wanted to stand up and start screaming. But I had to be educated and smart about it. Michelle, sophomore

Michelle’s experience was typical of participants, as well as African American students in general who often spoke of having “their intelligence and the legitimacy of their admission questioned” (O’Connor, 2002, p. 887). In addition, participants continuously spoke of feeling as though they had to dispel stereotypes, most often around the Fellowship.

I guess we just, we just talked about especially with the few of us having the Bunton-Waller scholarship you know I guess the issues came up, they were joking but the issue came up with oh you got it cause you’re Black, kind of thing. And so like you know that kind of hurt. It was like no I got it because I’m you know I’m smart. And they were like I’m smart too. You know so you know that, that came up. But like so that was probably our, our main issue was, yeah having like a quota and most of the time we were, I don’t want to say arguing, we were having a discussion on whether or not Penn State has a quota per, you know even though you’re not supposed to. But it’s that’s what it feels like that’s happening. So that was, we, we talked about that and how, like I, I guess I understood because the Bunton-Waller Fellow scholarship is for minorities but at the same time I, I don’t know it’s really hard to describe. We just, we wanted to make sure that this person, that these people knew that you know just because we had the scholarship it wasn’t because just because we were minorities and that Penn State had to give out money to minorities. That you know we, we deserved those and, and even some of the students got the money cause financially, they, they needed it to come to school, that they had the capabilities but not the financial capabilities. So you know it was just mostly discussion and whether or not Penn State really has a quota. Cierra, sophomore

Students became distressed when people assumed that they are at the university on any other type of scholarship besides an academic scholarship. Very often, others assumed that participants were at the university because of an athletic scholarship. This proved to be particularly upsetting for participants especially because of the stereotypes
that exist about African Americans and athletic prowess and African Americans and low academic performance.

It upsets me. Yeah, I mean, it’s like I’m just as capable of anything like you are so why would you have any doubts that I actually, you know, got an academic scholarship opposed to athletics. Like just people’s ignorance. Crystal, sophomore

Greg told the story of how people assumed he was at the university on an athletic scholarship. He went on to talk about how people cannot give Blacks the benefit of the doubt that they might be academically successful.

And it seemed like that’s, that’s a prevalent idea you know, what I did hate, right before you know coming here, announcing to people that I did get that scholarship, the first thing out of everybody’s mouth was because of basketball. I’m like, you guys been to my basketball games, you see I don’t score, why would I get a scholarship to Penn State to play basketball, please. And it seemed like no one could ever assume that I’m here academically or something like that. Because they all, well, a lot of people they just they can never give any minority the benefit of the doubt that you know, they’re here they should be smart. It seems like I have to prove it to people how smart I am cause it gets me really offended when somebody will ask the person next to me the question that everybody knows I’m qualified to answer, and won’t ask me at all. So, and it seemed like they never give any minority the benefit of the doubt that they may be here academically and not just, you know, I could see how maybe a couple people may think cause I’m, I’m kind of tall, I’m about 6’3, that you know, that people who have come to my games and see me play, I’m like you saw me play, like why would I be on an athletic scholarship. Greg, sophomore

Participants recognized that stereotypes existed about African American not being academically successful. As a result of this awareness, as well as being aware of the fact that they had to work twice as hard (racial socialization), participants believed that they had to prove that they deserved to be at the university and that they were not there only because of affirmative action or an athletic scholarship. Proving their academic competence proved to be tiring for participants, but also proved to be something that they
knew that they would have to continue doing. Through the earning exceptional grades, participants found a way to prove to others that they were intelligent and deserved to be at the university.

In addition to proving their academic competence in general, participants felt that they had to prove to others that they did not receive the Fellowship solely because of their race. Although the majority of participants had a strong identity as a Fellow, those who did not often feared that people, in particular Whites, would think less of their academic abilities and write them off as an “affirmative action” case. They did not let others know they were a Fellow for this reason, even though they said they were proud of their accomplishment in obtaining and retaining the award.

I guess just because people know that that is a scholarship I don’t want people to think that the only reason why I’m here is because of the scholarship. So I don’t even bring it up because being at a school like Penn State and having there be stereotypes around, I want people to realize she’s a smart girl before realizing oh she’s on scholarship, so.
Antoinette, sophomore

In a sense, participants were proud of their academic accomplishments and wanted others to know they were intelligent, but because they received an academic Fellowship, they did not want others to think that the Fellowship was given to them strictly because of race, which in fact was not an accurate assessment of the Fellowship Program. Even though the Fellowship was based on academic merit (and not awarded solely to students of color) participants had experienced others reaction to the belief that participants received the Fellowship strictly because they were African American. In a sense, it became easier not to let anyone know about the award because they would not have to prove anything to anyone.
I don’t [let people know I’m a Fellow] because, just because of affirmative action. I mean like I dealt with that at lot in Pennypacker. I mean they [Whites] looked at all the Black kids that were together and like oh the reason you’re here is because of your scholarship or oh look what affirmative action has done for you. Crystal, sophomore

For participants, trying to explain the Fellowship to other people who made assumptions about the award proved to be challenging because participants believed that they would write them off as an affirmative action case thereby dismissing all of their academic abilities. Angela summed up this sentiment.

I just, didn’t like I didn’t mind sharing it but if I had to share outside with someone who’s a minority or someone who had no clue, I just hate trying to explain it all to them. Try to really make sure they knew that it wasn’t just that I was Black. Because, I know I, I worked hard and I, I think I deserve it. Angela, senior

Participants were hesitant to share the fact they were Fellows with others for fear of their reaction. So there existed a dichotomy: on one hand, students believed “yes, I deserve the award, it tells me that I smart”. On the other, students did not want others to know they received the award because it in some way might invalidate their academic achievements. Consistent with the literature on African American students being reluctant to share their academic awards (Feagin et al., 1996), Crystal shared her experiences,

No. They just they [Black students] just really say like oh you’re lucky. Or you see more of a jealousy issue when it comes to that. But I really don’t tell Black students either that I’m on scholarship… Like why, I mean because they see themselves as a minority as well so they’re like I’m Black just like you but yet you’re supposedly special . . . mean like they’ll, when I came up for achievers weekend, which is why I was uncomfortable and awkward which was because they would say, they would start comparing like what was your high school GPA? Or what did you do? Like what did you do? Like did you take the AP? And then when I tell them like yeah I took like I took six APs, yeah I had a job, tennis captain, and I was in all these clubs and I had a 3.8. Like that’s why I got this. And
then afterwards like they kind of shut up afterwards. And like oh okay well, but I don’t like being challenged like to say what makes you worthy of getting this scholarship? And what makes you so much better than I am? Like that’s how pretty much I felt that like other Black students that don’t have a scholarship will look at it. Not all Black students. Some of Black, some Black students are like, hey congrats, like good job. And then other ones are just like have an attitude as far, as, oh, like, no, they’ll make it up like in other conversations that you have, you’ll say I’m broke. Like they’re still such a thing as being on scholarship and being broke. Like right now I’m broke and I need a job and like they’ll say how can you be broke with a full ride? Like that type stuff and you’re like okay. That’s a little bit of tension there. A little animosity towards me. That type stuff. So I don’t tell people. I avoid it. I mean if you ask I’ll tell you I mean I’m not going to lie but unless you ask you won’t find out. Crystal, sophomore

Crystal was one of the few participants to discuss the reaction to being a Fellow from other students of color. In her experiences, the reaction was not very positive with others wanting to know why she “got it” and they did not. It did not appear to be about challenging her academic abilities or whether she deserved the award or not, but rather more about why they did not receive the award, as they believed they were equally academically capable and also needed the money to finance their education. The majority of participants spoke to the fact they did not want other non-minority students to know they were Fellows because it was these students who questioned their presence at the university.

Through being a Fellow, participants were able to see other students like themselves, it helped not only dispel stereotypes others had, but also stereotypes they might have had about high-achieving African American college students (Fries-Britt, 1998, 2002). As Isaac stated, “‘Cause then it gives you the impression that all stereotypes are not, like not 100% true. So they may be completely wrong. They may be anywhere else on the continuum. But they’re not necessarily completely true”.
Even though participants worked hard to dispel negative stereotypes, they came to realize that they in fact held some of the same stereotypes that they were working so hard to prove wrong.

I felt like after high school, I felt like there were so few Black and minority students who really wanted to succeed and to really want to be about something. And coming to Penn State that, it really just kind of said no, you’re, you’re wrong about that. Donna, senior

Prior to coming to college, participants did not encounter other high-achieving students of color. Once at the university and through being a Fellow and living in Pennypacker, participants were able to see that, yes, they were not alone or an exception and that others shared their academic desires and abilities.

*Fellowship Program (Being a Fellow)*

Through the reflected appraisals of the generalized other in the form of the Fellowship Program, participants saw themselves reflected positively and gained knowledge about their academic abilities. In this case, the message was that they were scholars. In fact, this message was communicated frequently at every function the Fellows had as well at every function for all Pennypacker residents, the many participants referred to themselves a scholar.

By being selected as a Fellow and through the positive reflected appraisals of the group, academic self-concept was positively influenced. Through the various components of the Fellowship Program, academic and residential, participants identified several ways in which the program influenced their academic self-concept. Specifically, through the
Fellowship Program, participants found refuge, a sense of privilege, and a reference group.

Refuge

Being a Fellow allowed participants to be engaged with other high-achieving students from diverse backgrounds. Particularly living in the residence hall their first-year allowed participants to build relationships with a diverse group of students. Pennypacker Hall was a scholarly diverse living learning environment that housed first-year Fellows and students who participated in a special living option for first-year students in science and engineering. While the majority of students formed their closest friendships through Pennypacker, even in the case where friendships were not formed, simply being around and seeing other successful students, particularly students of color was important. Living there provided a refuge of sorts where participants could be around others who had similar interest, experiences, and motivation as they.

So I wouldn’t really say that it [Pennypacker] helped me to make friends. But it’s just always nice to have a group of Black people that are as smart as or smarter than you around you, whether they be your friends or not. It’s encouraging. It helps. And like I said, it’s kind of like a little family away from home, that sort of thing. Joanne, senior

The residential component of the Fellowship Program allowed students to live, socialize, and study with other high-achieving students of color. It provided a “surrogate family”, a home away from home for participants. For the sophomores the experience of living in Pennypacker was still very fresh and they spoke of it with excitement.

It was refreshing to be around people who had the ambitions, that same drive I did. It was like everybody was here doing well. And it was just, it
wasn’t just, you know, me, like the only African American, like in the top. It was like, I remember African Americans doing, was in the top, you know, that’s how we all had to live in Pennypacker, so we were all in the top. And you know, it was refreshing just to see a lot of other minorities living with me that were all succeeding. Greg, sophomore

Although the seniors were more removed from Pennypacker, they still spoke of it as a very positive experience for them. They seemed to appreciate the supportive environment now more than they did when they were living there.

Definitely. Cause otherwise I think I would have been, I wouldn’t have like a support system in a way if I wasn’t surrounding myself with someone who was going through the same thing that I was going through. We were able you know when something bad happened in class at least I knew when I came home that it would be a positive atmosphere or if I need some support, so someone would be there to be supportive. Renee, senior

Overall, Pennypacker represented a positive experience for participants. Not only did it provide an academic safe haven, it also provided a social safe haven. As Joanne stated,

But you feel like in a way like you have a safe haven to go back to when you go, and you go back to your dorm and, and you find people that you can talk to your hair, you can talk about hair with. And you know they won’t be like huh? Joanne, senior

In this manner, the residential component served as an extended family, a home away from home, where participants could be rejuvenated and prepared to focus on their academics. It served in the role that family members served prior to entering college. It allowed participants to recognize that were not alone or the only high-achieving African American college students out there.

Well sort of cause like I guess like I guess sometimes you don’t want to feel like you’re the only one. And with the meteorology major basically I’m one of the few. Like there’s really not that many African Americans or any minorities majoring in meteorology. So it sort of was, sort of, it sort of
was just a little bit important to make me feel like maybe like, like a connection to something. Kevin, sophomore

The program provided a place where, for the most part, with the exception of a couple of participants, participants did not have to worry about proving their academic competence, they could relax and be themselves and be around others who could not only relate to their academic experiences and goals, but also to their personal experiences as a high achiever. A place where they saw themselves reflected positively.

Privilege

The majority of participants had a strong identity as a Fellow. As Zaire stated, “Being a Fellow is part of me. That’s who I am, that’s who I’ll always be”. Participants were proud of the fact that they worked hard in high school and had been recognized for their academic success through the receipt of the Fellowship. Identifying with being a Fellow and maintaining their Fellowship had a positive influence on their academic self-perceptions. It reinforced the idea that they were smart and high-achieving. Being a Fellow was viewed as an honor and a privilege. It was also viewed as an opportunity to be successful in life.

Being a [Fellow], I think it’s a, I think it’s an honor because you’re, you are, you are looked at as like you know the highest, the high-achieving minority, you’re a high-achieving minority and you, the fact that because you’re a minority and just made it so far, like so far high, like so far above the rest of the minority and you’re considered one of the top of, top of like the selection and everything it’s, it’s definitely an honor and it’s something that you want to, you want continue having, like being a role model for other African Americans or any minority in high school or anything. Jazz, sophomore
Participants took the responsibility of being a Fellow seriously. They were aware that they were privileged to receive the award and were cognizant that they had high standards to live up to and that they not only represented the university, but the African American community.

To be a [Fellow]...I really, I really feel like I represent Penn State all the time, not just here, but when I go home and when I graduate I’ll still be representing Penn State. And not only that but also represent the Black community at Penn State. Or as the minority community at Penn State as well. So I think it’s really important to, you know to show everyone else what we’re capable of, that we’re not you know below standard you know.

Donna, senior

The majority of participants were also proud of their accomplishment of being selected as a Fellow. They saw it as an indication not only to others but to themselves that they were in fact high-achieving and intelligent. Angela stated, “It means a lot to me to be a Bunton-Waller. I don’t know. That’s like, like my number one, like I’m most proud of that than anything else”.

That participants earned the award, while others had not, was a source of pride. Having the award gave participants confidence in their academic abilities that they could be successful.

I think it means a lot. And I always say it with pride. And I’m just very proud that not only I got it, but I also maintained it. And to be one of the few to be chosen and especially since I know so many people in this university that I feel have, that I know have better GPA’s than me. That are more involved than me, that you know, do all this, all these other things that I don’t do. At the same time, you’re not a Bunton-Waller Fellow, I am, you know, so. It gives me the confidence I need to go out and compete with whoever else is around me. Because sometimes it doesn’t necessarily matter everything you have going on. It’s like, you know, you chose me for me. You know, and I do have a lot of things going on, but at the same time, you got a chance to know me, and you liked what you saw, you saw the potential in me. You saw that I would be able to maintain this and contribute something to the college. And I feel I
did do that. And I feel like I would not have done that if I didn’t have the scholarship. Joanne, senior

Participants consistently spoke of feeling like they were part of an elite group because of the limited number of awards distributed each year.

Outside financial, it’s something to be very, very proud of, because I’m one of about 50 in the entire Penn State umbrella, so, to be one in that little of number, like that speaks volumes. Because 40,000 strong here, only 50 of have this school’s scholarship. And I’m one of them. So, it’s something I can just walk around, like I just wear it on my chest, like I’m a Bunton-Waller Fellow. Greg, senior

For a couple of participants, being a Fellow was strictly related to the financial component of the award. Interestingly, the participants who felt this way were those participants who came from a higher socioeconomic status and who grew up with a strong sense of racial pride in the form of having parents who were very involved in racial pride movements. Isaac and John were two examples of this.

It just means that I’m a minority and I got some either a full ride or full tuition. Bunton-Waller Fellow is sort of I think does a lot of things right in that their goal is good, their, their ideas about providing like an environment to foster academic success is good. The way things is carried out is not good at all. Isaac, senior

Well I, I guess it means you’re a minority scholar? I don’t know there’s something beyond that? I mean, someone who is you know a high-achieving student before they come here and who is, I don’t know . . .Well I mean I’m you know very appreciative that I’ve been given this opportunity and I would like to, to repay the university by, by being successful you know maintaining my scholarship and you know doing well in the end. John, senior

While the financial component of the award was critical for all participants, the majority recognized that being a Fellow meant more than just the financial component.

Receiving the award and being able to attend college without debt has changed the course of their life. This became critical because participants knew that if their grades fell below
the programs requirements, they could lose their fellowship. Losing the Fellowship for many meant that they might not be able to complete their education at the university.

Wow, it was, I would say an honor because I feel as though it was one of the best opportunities I think because financially I’m set up for the rest of my life. I don’t have to worry about you know paying back any loans or you know tuition and things like that. College would have been a financial burden on my parents. So that was extremely helpful. And it was just, it was an honor to be you know that all my efforts from elementary school and high school paid off. And for me to continue that here which I have because I’ve been, I have scholarships and I’m about to graduate. And I think that should be the most fulfilling is that you know I went for four years and made sure my GPA was above average to keep the fellowship. And just recognize that this is just very important to that you know students who are Fellows they are so motivated, or motivated themselves to make sure that they kept the, the financial needs because otherwise it was you know, my GPA could have been, could have been lower because there was nothing, no goal set. And even though our goal is a 4.0 you know and it’s required that you have to have above a 3.2 so it was just a goal was already set you know for me. And it was just exceeding in that. So I think it was an honor. I appreciate it a lot. As well as my parents.

Renee, senior

Knowing that others had confidence in their academic abilities by selecting them as a Fellow reinforced the positive beliefs that participants had about their academic abilities. The program therefore, once again served a generalized other that positively influenced academic self-concept.

It means thank God for that because education is paid for. It means a Bun, to be a Bunton-Waller Fellow. It’s kind of a elite kind of minority, minority thing. I mean how many kids get it every year? I don’t know the numbers but it’s very special to be acknowledged, you know not only as a minority but as a student in general. Cause they think that you have an opportunity. They think that they’re investing their money in you. I mean some kids mess up and lose it but at the same time people are saying we believe, we have faith enough in you that you are going to make us proud. Not only at Penn State but in like in the world in general. That you’re going to take what you know here and then use it. That’s what higher education is for. Take what you learned in college so that you can affect something in your, in the real world. So, I find it, I’m very proud to be a part of Bunton-Waller Fellows and stuff like that. I’ll tell them in the
second. I’m a Bunton-Waller Fellow. What does that mean? Michelle, sophomore

Seeing others like themselves allowed participants to see themselves reflected in a positive academic light by providing a refuge – a home away from home, a reference group, and a sense of privilege and opportunity. It also provided a means to dispel negative stereotypes that they might hold themselves about African American academic achievers. As Tatum (1997) writes, “Black youth can benefit from seeking support from those who have had similar experiences” (Tatum, 1997, p. 71).

Reference group

Interestingly, those participants who compared themselves to Whites in high school now found that they compared themselves to the “high-ending minority kids”. This appeared to be because that was with whom participants socialized most. In other words, proximity still determined the reference group, and even though participants attended a PWI, their immediate social circle was most often comprised of students of color. While a very small number of participants compared themselves to students in their major, most students compared themselves to others in their immediate social circle, their friends. Angela was an example of this. Angela was also a Schreyer Honors student and did not socialize much with other Honors students. Her primary friendship group consisted of other students of color and Fellows. She started off saying that she did not compare herself to anyone, but it can be seen that the reason she did not compare herself to anyone was because none of her friends were in her major or Schreyer Honors College.
I don’t really have any people in my same major that are really my good friends. I don’t compare myself to the honors kids. Because they’re in their own little world….Yeah. I don’t compare myself to them because I know I’m doing all kinds of other things. I, I’m sure some of them are doing other things but I don’t really, I don’t really socialize too much with them. Angela, senior

The majority of people in participants’ social circle were students of color and Fellows. Most respondents compared themselves to and viewed their competition as other high-achieving students of color and Fellows. Most students compared themselves academically to their friends, the people with whom they spent the most time. For many, these friends were African American or other students of color, which was different from their experiences in high school.

I guess you would say like in Bunton-Waller like the, the people that I’m around with like I know are the people that are in my classes. And because I lived with them last year and we studied together, that’s who I compare myself with. And it’s funny how I compare myself to White people in high school but here I don’t do that. I compare myself to the minority, the high ending minority kids here because I think we work harder than most people on the campus, cause we have to. And so that’s who I compare myself academically with is those high-achieving minority kids because we’re all here for the same reason… You’re around, like I said I think that’s who you are around with. I was around with a lot of White kids back in high school. Now I’m not around a lot of White kids. I’m around with the people from the Pennypacker Bunton-Waller Experience. So that’s who I associate myself with. Michelle, sophomore

Cierra, who compared herself to the Asian and Jewish males in high school, found that she compared herself to the other Fellows. Although she viewed them as her comparison group, they still worked together to ensure that they were all academically successful. She stated, “Just kind of seeing where everybody fits and how you’re all doing. And you know helping each other out if like we have the same class and one’s not doing particularly well”.
Whether students compared themselves to African American or White students depended on their friendship groups. Whom participants spent the most time with influenced the comparison process. Donna, who had a lot of White friends, stated,

I’ve been comparing myself to my friends. Like a lot of the White friends that I have actually and also students in other majors like students who aren’t in the sciences, who are in business or you know sometimes engineering….Well I definitely have a number of White friends here. So just comparing myself to my friends. Then just kind of seeing where I stand. Donna, senior

For Antoinette, the comparison occurred among her African American friends. In this instance, she and her friends shared the same motivation level. Like the majority of the participants, Antoinette and her friends spent time discussing their academic experiences and their academic goals for the semester.

Like our goals. Like how much, like what GPA we’re aiming to be at. So then that way we can help each other you know, remind each other, well you know you said you wanted to get like a 3.8 this semester, so maybe you should do your homework (laughs). Things like that. Antoinette, sophomore

While the majority of participants’ reference group stemmed from being a Fellow, it is worth noting that a few students compared themselves to a family member, such as a mother, father, or sibling. Interestingly, those students who came from highly educated families compared themselves to their parents—John and Isaac, in particular. Both of John’s parents had PhDs and were professors. John also grew up on the campus of a historically Black university. Both of Isaac’s parents were engineers, holding advanced degrees from Ivy League institutions.

Well probably my parents I guess. Both are very, very credentialed academically and my, my dad in particular I’ve always been just amazed by his intellect and his ability to retain information that he learned a long time ago, a long time ago even from like you know grade school or
something. And sometimes it’s difficult because I you know, you know inevitably I’ll compare to myself to him and I think oh gosh, I’m like (laughing) there’s, there’s a long way to go. And you know but it’s, you know, but in, in some ways it’s, it’s good to have such a role model in front of me. You know something that I can strive for. But yeah, yeah sometimes its, it’s difficult to you know I, I would see myself going through a course, you know, and, and I might be very successful in the course but you know a few years later I might not be able to remember enough from, I’ll have to go back to literature. It’s sort of you know disconcerting at times cause you know I’d sort of had this plan initially in college that you know my, my main goal is that I will remember everything that I learned. That is my goal. John, senior

In addition, a few participants indicated that they did not compare themselves to anyone; they just did the best they could.

I’m not so much comparing myself with anybody. I’m just trying to really do the best that I can. You know, I don’t compare my grades or compare what that person has or what that person doesn’t have. Like in French class he stands out. So and I realize that okay that’s where I need to be, you know. But and for the most part though, it’s more like okay this is my goal for this class and this is the goal that I’m going to try to achieve.
Zaire, sophomore

Although Zaire’s comment was common among the few students who indicated that they did not compare themselves to anyone, upon further investigation, these participants revealed that they used external measures of validation, such as grade point average, as a means of comparison.

Lastly, while participants primarily viewed other Fellows and residents in Pennypacker as their reference group for social comparisons as well as their competition, the competition seemed to be friendly. A competition that focused on making sure that they were all successful. This communal sense of achievement provided encouragement and fostered respect for one another, and served as a motivational influence, all areas that were important for participants to see.
It’s been, it’s an encouragement because you feel like you have to, you have to match up to their level and it’s, in a way the, the way, we all have a scholarship. It’s like we’re all trying to compete to maintain that’s scholarship. So it’s healthy competition to actually try and strive to be you know be our best because we have an actual, we have a scholarship to uphold. So being with other like all high, all high-achieving minority people that are like you then it definitely, it’s an encouragement. Joanne, senior

Social Comparison

While participants most often compared themselves to other students of color, usually other Fellows of color or friends who were not Fellows who they met through the residential component of the Fellowship Program, there were other measures that participants used to gain knowledge about their academic abilities, such as grade point average (GPA). As previously discussed, being a Fellow and through the Fellowship Program, participants had a reference group to whom they compared themselves to get a sense of their academic abilities. What follows is a discussion of how GPA influenced academic self-concept.

**Grade point average**

Most of the students were very aware of the importance a high GPA, as they must maintain a 3.0 GPA (2.75 their first-year) to retain their Fellowship. In addition, the program co-directors encouraged students to obtain a 3.5 (Dean’s List). This message was communicated consistently during their years in the program. As a result, students were often focused on achieving these goals. Students revealed that this external measure
gave them some sense of their academic abilities. As Angela stated, “I guess trying to get on the dean’s list all the time or I still have both my scholarships, things like that”.

Although there was a focus on grades from the Fellowship program, there was an even mix of students who thought that their GPA was an accurate reflection of their academic abilities and those who did not think that it was an accurate reflection.

On his 3.67 GPA: Well no cause I mean it’s just a number. Like you, like I guess like you right now you’re basing what you think like you think how smart you is or how good of a student you is by that GPA. But I think it really comes down to like in the real world or like doing other things other than a class assignments. Like will you be able to use the knowledge that you’ve gained from classes in other areas. Kevin, sophomore

On his 2.98 GPA: [My GPA is not reflective] Of what I’m capable of. And I think once I make this change [to another major] that I will make significant upwards trajectory. So yeah. John, senior

On her 3.52 GPA: I think especially considering the type of school that I’m in, which is very academically challenging. I’m definitely satisfied with that GPA. Antoinette, sophomore

On her 3.31 GPA: And basically, I’m, I’m satisfied with that but I know I can do better. But that’s why I think that I’m trained in my head especially to see if I can actually get better this year. Jazz, sophomore

While participants always thought that they could improve their GPA, many were satisfied with their grade. It is worth noting that regardless of their GPA, participants’ academic self-concept remained positive. Crystal was the exception. She spoke of how her academic self-concept lowered as a result of her GPA lowering.

And I had gotten a 3.41 and when I found out that was .9 below Dean’s list, I was upset. Like I felt like I did horrible. I mean even though it still was a good GPA it didn’t seem good to me. Especially like my roommate had gotten like a 3.7 or something like that. And I felt the inferior one when I was used to being like academically superior. It was a horrible feeling. And then well second semester I tried but that math class brought me down and it brought my GPA down to a 3.03. I was a bit crushed. I wish I could have dropped the class but it was too late for that. So I mean
now I’m back in it like trying to pull it back up but the drive, the drive is there but the actual succeeding in that in pulling it back up is slow. And it’s kind of hard to have the patience to see and wait like the year I get straight As the whole semester I mean it only pulls it up a little bit. So it’s kind of, it’s not reinforcing enough for me in a sense.

Crystal’s experience of having a lowered academic self-concept as a result of having a lower GPA was not indicative of the majority of participants. Although other participants’ GPA might have fluctuated and they may or may not have thought it was reflective of their academic abilities, participants still thought very highly of their academic abilities. This could possibly be due to the fact participants chose to focus on the reflected appraisals from significant others and the generalized other in the form of being a Fellow more so than social comparison, specifically GPA.

Racial Identity

It was somewhat challenging for participants to answer the question, “if someone where to ask you your race, what would you say?” While the majority said “Black”, many said “Black or African American” and proceeded to explain how these terms had different meanings to them. For most, as they struggled with this answer, they attempted to define the difference between Black and African American in a very intellectual manner.

My first is to say Black, but that’s not PC, so, African American. Like I have a hard time saying African American ‘cause what do you call people that come from Africa that are American citizens then? Like the distinction between us, like I’m an African American, like, but the last descendant of my family from my family was brought over here a couple hundred years ago. So I’m, Black American. Greg, sophomore
For others, such as Donna, the terms Black and African American had very personal distinctions. Which term she used depended on the day and what was happening to her.

Black or African American, I’d go with that. But some days, like it really doesn’t matter, if you’re going to, to me they’re usually the same thing, but, on days when I feel resentful to the fact that in my mind Black people in America don’t have much history, I’ll say that I’m African American just so I can have something to identify with. Yeah, but on other days when everything is fine and dandy, Black will do. Donna, senior

On the days that Donna said she was African American, what made her feel that way was based in how she was treated by others. During interview two, I asked Donna her race again and she replied, “I’m Black today” because “today is just a simple day and I haven’t really felt like I need to justify who I am yet for the day.” It was interesting that she stated “yet”, as if she anticipated having to do so, similar to the notion of participants feeling they had to prove they deserved to be at the university.

She told the story of a time when, if asked on that day, she would have said she was African American.

Well you know I had just gone out a couple weeks ago I guess on a Saturday night and friends and I were walking home and we passed this young man on Beaver Ave. It’s hey Sheniqua. What’s going on Sheniqua? And I’ve never seen him. And I, I think I’m pretty good with faces. I’m pretty sure that he’s never seen me either, especially considering that he didn’t know my name. And I was just very, just kind of like awestruck that he thought that was funny to share with somebody that he doesn’t know, like at all. So I was very, like very offended with how insensitive that was…You know I pretty much just, well I tried to remain composed but you know it was like you know do you know me? What’s, what’s my name? No that’s not my name. I’m sorry you have me mistaken. You know that kind of thing. Just like you know I really don’t appreciate that. That’s not cool. And there’s nothing I could do after that. So and walked away from it. Donna, senior
Those participants who identified with more than one race felt that they “had the best of both worlds.” For example, Angela identified as Black and Mexican and Jazz identified as Black Hispanic. In addition, two participants identified ethnically as Haitian and Guyanese, but referred to themselves as Black or African American throughout the interview process. Two participants identified as Black and Native American, however, they did not have a very strong identification with their Native American roots.

Well see in my family I have a lot of Native American as well. So usually I just leave off the Native American because now as I’m finding out it seems like every Black person says well I have Native American in me too. So I just leave it off. And they’re like really? And so I mean like I have it in my middle name, I have it in my family, I mean like all of the jewelry, all of the tribal symbols. Everything. Like it’s a big thing but like I just leave it off because every other like, every other person has it in them too. So but usually Black just means of African descent. Crystal, sophomore

In interview one, when asked his race, Leroy stated Black and Native American and that the meaning was strictly tied to bloodlines. In interview two when asked the same question, he responded Black. When asked about being Native American and Black, he replied,

Well usually when most people ask me I just say Black I guess basically because like the one drop or if you have any Black, you’re Black. So that’s basically what I always go by since I guess most people don’t really know much about Native Americans. Most of the time I just consider I guess not worth my time. Leroy, senior

Being around other academically successful underrepresented students through living in a scholarly diverse residence hall had a positive influence on racial identity. This was particularly true for those who identified with two races, such as Angela, who identified as Black and Mexican and who grew up in a White town. Prior to attending college, she stated that everyone assumed she was Black, but now she referred to herself
as Black and Mexican. She attributed this change to living in the residence hall her first year.

I would give a lot of credit to Pennypacker. With all those minorities. I’ve never been with any type of color like that. And everyone would just ask me like what are you? They just, they just knew that I wasn’t just all Black. So I got that question a lot. And then being around a lot more Spanish people I was like hey, I’m Spanish too. Angela, senior

Although participants referred to themselves by different terms as it related to race, the terms used did not seem to influence their academic self-concept. What did have an influence was the meaning they attached the terms, the ways in which they showed pride in their race, and the messages they received about what it meant to be their race from family members.

The majority viewed race as solely related to skin color. As such, race did not appear to be a central part of self-concept for these students; it was, in fact, just a part of who they were.

It means to have brown skin and it also means just to have an awareness of yourself and, not even necessarily, like, yes your ancestors, but even just your family, immediate family know and, and what they’re doing and what had happened in the past and why we’re the way we are. And…embracing it and loving it. Joanne, senior

Participants knew that they were Black or African American, that was obvious, and all received clear messages from family members about their race. These messages most often consisted of pressure to work twice as hard as others to be successful.

Although each received these multiple and different messages about race, for those who viewed their racial identity as more than skin color, they most often associated being African American with the historical struggles of the race. It appeared that focusing on
this aspect gave students an avenue and an incentive to work hard and achieve because of historical and cultural sacrifices made by African Americans.

It means that I have a heritage of, of people that have been oppressed and especially African Americans, which means that I, I can’t reap all the benefits of the, the American dream. And I mean it’s nothing unique to me as an African American. That doesn’t mean any different than most generations of a lot of African Americans I know. Isaac, senior

Consistent with the desire to prove academic ability, participants felt a drive to dispel negative stereotypes about African Americans. This was achieved through the acquisition of knowledge and succeeding academically and professionally.

Basically means I am the product of people who have gone through hundreds and hundreds of years of just… complete emotional and mental destruction. So, I feel as if it’s, it’s my duty just to kind of push a positive message into the world. We’ve you know there’s so many stereotypes and there’s so many images of Blacks as a whole and I feel that I shouldn’t even be involving myself in the stereotype. But it is my duty just to better myself and hopefully better my race for others to see. I feel it’s my duty just because I want to go into the medical profession. And I don’t want to be seen as the typical Black woman in society and of course the stereotype is you know she’s loud and she’s ghetto, she has weave, long fingernails and everything. And I don’t want to be perceived that way. I was not brought into the world looking like that and talking like that. And I really don’t want to be seen in this world and leaving this world like that. So I feel as if, you know, coming into this world, gaining all the knowledge I can from school, from my parents, from my friends and everything hopefully and just not being a part of that stereotype because I don’t want to part of that negative. Serena, sophomore

Similar to those participants who identified their race with skin color, one participant indicated that she was now trying to realize what her racial identity was. She was the only participant who stated that she was struggling with this.

Actually, now I’m having, not identity issues, it’s just that because I’m now surrounded by a diverse group, specific Hispanic and Indian, I’m starting to realize, I’m trying to realize what my identity is. Because they have, they can trace their families form generations ago, they just have, their culture is so rich in so many other places. And I’m like, well I’m
Renee from Philly, you know, and it’s just like, you know, we, African Americans have done so much in our country, but, we’re still, I still feel I’m still not treated as you know, a, a first class citizen in a sense. And it’s just that, I don’t know where my identity lies. …And I’m like with us it’s just Black skin and dark skin and light skin. So, I just decided not to even focus on like the racial, my racial identity instead of, because I was just, I’m like confused because I don’t understand why, like I feel like something was taken away from me in a sense. Because you know, my Argentinean friend can talk about what happened to her at home and things like that in her own country and I’m like, you know, I’m Renee from Philly. And I just focus on empowering myself and my friends, so that they don’t see African Americans or African American students as non-achievers or people who are not trying to attain in this society and I feel as though that is something that I’ve been doing ever since I was in elementary school, to better my community and better myself. Renee, senior

The feelings that Renee expressed of not having a culture was common in other students, although the verbal expression of trying to find her identity was not common. Participants spoke of feeling as though Black Americans had no history or culture. In an effort to counteract this feeling, most students relied on their academic abilities as a means of showing who they were as a Black or African American person. It was often through the domain of academics that participants found their identity as a Black person.

**Academic Meaning**

Racial identity or the meaning that participants attached to their race was tied intricately to their academic self-concept. These two components of self-concept overlapped creating a place where participants’ attached meaning to the role of academics in their lives and their racial identity. Showing racial pride was achieved through academic success or pursuits, thus tying together their social (in the form of racial identity) and academic self-concepts. For example, participants spoke of showing pride
by “going to an all White school”, by “getting up everyday, sitting in the front row of my classes”, and completing class assignments on African American topics.

How do I show pride? (said to herself) Um…I don’t know…I think mainly like in school and like in classes and things whenever we have any sort of like research, I know with like, for example, my speech com class, um, whenever we have to choose things, I always choose, like Black people, like cause I did Sojourner Truth’s speech and um, then like, cause we had to kinda choose one speech for the semester and then do like different things with it. So then, when I had to do something else with, um, I chose Stokely Carmichael, you know, just always choosing the Black thing to present to the class, I think that’s how I do it like school wise. Joanne, senior

Students were keenly aware that they stood out as an African American person attending a PWI. As a result, they felt that they must set an example. As Donna, succinctly stated, “you just gotta represent”. This was accomplished by

Not being afraid to do things that you want to do when there aren’t people who are like you there. Like coming to Penn state, some of the things I got involved in there aren’t many African Americans or Latinos involved and I would like there to be, but it wasn’t going to stop me from doing whatever activity or setting whatever goals because I wasn’t as comfortable as I wanted to be in the environment. I give a hundred and ten percent every time, no matter who I’m with, you know, whether I’m with other African Americans or with Whites or whomever. Donna, senior

For others, it was about just doing well. As Isaac said, “I, just do things well in my skin color. Because I stand out. Wherever I go, I stand out”. He went on to give an example of how he stands out.

After I did something well, to be recognized, to advance my race, I would just show up. Because, many times, they weren’t expecting a Black person to win something. Like I won a programming contest my sophomore year here. And so I won this national programming contest. And when I showed up to get the prize, there were no other Black people who entered.

Isaac was the only participant to discuss his understanding of racial identity models. He had taken and been a teaching assistant for a race relations course at the
university. As a result of these experiences, his understanding of his racial identity was more developed than other participants. He was also home schooled and part of his schooling was a focus on African and African American history. In discussing his experiences with Whites and stereotypes that exist about African Americans, he stated,

Like I used to get mad, then I just got tired, then I just started hating White people, and then sort of came full circle and said it’s a Black cultural awareness. This, this, this interesting. It just motivates me to, to do well. Not necessarily do well in school. But to do well in some form or fashion…Like become something that, that even racist White people would identify as impressive. Isaac, senior

Participants desired to do well in school and in life not only for themselves, but once again to prove to those who doubt them. It appeared that having these people recognize their worth gave participants a sense of accomplishment.

According to the literature, there is often a conflict that arises between racial identity and academic self-concept for high-achieving African American students (Ford, 1996; Ford et al., 1994; Tatum, 1997). These students live in a society that often reinforces the stereotype that African Americans are not academically successful. Participants were aware of this; however, they did not appear to be influenced by this conflict. Participants were aware of the existence of this conflict; however, they did not seem to be subjected to or struggling with it personally.

When I got into Georgetown University one of the White kids said well you’re pretty smart for a Black person. And it’s just even if no matter where you are you’re being judged: in the cities, in the suburbs and rural areas. As African Americans we are, we don’t really have a place to call especially if you’re very, unless you’re very smart, you don’t feel like you belong in, in a place. And I think it’s a psychological mindset that, that we have that we take with us is that we’re not supposed to be smart. That’s what the world, we’re not supposed to be successful, and you get to Penn State and this you know majority White community and they’re telling you okay now let’s see what you can do. I look at it and I’ve learned to
deal with it. I’m saying you want me to, for you I think you want me to fail, you want me to be what you expect most African Americans to be. I can’t be like that because I’m not. That’s how I’ve kind of come up with it. I think the psychological mindset we need to just let it go and just let, live our lives the way we’re supposed to without the stereotypes, without letting even in the Black community let us, put us down. Even in the White communities put us down and just go our own path and keep on trucking because that’s the only way we’re ever going to succeed is through this understanding of let’s see what you can do. So that’s how I live it. Michelle, sophomore

In fact, racial socialization and academic socialization messages seemed to serve as a buffer for these students, detracting from the internalization of negative stereotypes about Blacks and academic achievement, possibly alleviating the conflict that typically arises between academic self-concept and racial identity.

In addition, the fact that participants consistently spoke of racial pride in terms of academics could have been because the focus of the current research was on academics. As a result, it would stand to reason that participants focused on defining themselves solely through academics. It would be interesting to see if participants still associated racial pride through an academic lens if the focus of the research was not on academic self-concept.

In addition to defining race in terms of academic success and pursuits, participants viewed academics and being a Fellow as central to self-definition and an opportunity to be successful in life. Participants felt like they had to continue their education because being academically successful was central to who they were. In other words, academics has always been and continues to be their “life”. Angela’s comment was typical of how participants defined the role of academics in their lives. She stated, “I think academics is, it’s everything. It is my life. And I can’t see myself doing anything
but academic things”. Joanne echoed these sentiments when she said, “Academics is a huge part of my life. I kind of think it’s all my life, sometimes”.

Overall achieving academic success was viewed as an opportunity to be successful in life. This was in line with the academic socialization messages participants received growing up. As Jazz stated, “I have to do well in, in school. I have to, I have to continue what I’ve been doing since high school because that’s the only way that the opportunities will just keep coming my way”. In addition, John stated, “It really is, it really has been the priority for a long time. I mean it was just instilled in me. I mean I grew up in a academic family and it’s just been, that’s essential to growth as an individual and success in your intended career path”.

Participants spoke of feeling honored and appreciated by the university for being selected as a Fellow, viewing it as an opportunity as “probably one of the greatest things that has ever, ever happened” to them. As a result of academics being participants’ “life”, it was viewed as an opportunity to be successful in life and achieve their academic and professional goals. In discussing the meaning that academics had in her life, Michelle stated,

Opportunity. Academics, I’m a huge believer that with education you can go as far as you want. People have argued with me about it, the effect it has and all that stuff. But I think the key to getting out of wherever you’re getting out of is through taking steps through education and academics. Sometimes it’s not going to be easy cause learning isn’t. Sometimes it’s going to be a pain. You don’t feel like doing it. It’s hard. But it all teaches you something better to take with you in the rest of your life…Academics just aids you in conversations. Having the opportunity to put your two cents into things, and you can’t put your two cents into things you don’t know about. Or you can. But you’ll only sound stupid. Michelle, sophomore
For these participants, academics was a large and critical piece of who they were. They not only defined themselves in terms of academics but also defined themselves racially through academics. Academic pursuits were viewed as an opportunity to fulfill the goals their families had set for them, as well as the goals they set for themselves.

Serena summed it up for all participants,

> It has the most important role, it has the most important role, just because academics is the one thing that’s going to take me far, because, I mean you can’t go off of good looks, you can only do that for so long, you need something to fall back on you know. So I mean, me getting my grades and graduating and going to graduate school, that’s the one thing that’s going to make me, put me where I want to be in life.

Because academics had such a critical role in their lives, it was central to their self-definition. Overall, academics has been and continues to be their life. Through academic success and pursuits, participants not only demonstrated racial pride, but also believed that they would be afforded more opportunities to succeed for themselves, their families, and the African American community.

**Summary of Model**

This research sought to understand and generate a model of how the social world influenced the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Academic self-concept is what a person thinks of his or her academic ability when compared to others. High-achieving African American college students are African American students at a PWI who received an academic fellowship.
Based on the findings from the data analysis, I present a model (see below) that explains how the social world influences the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a PWI. Because this research focused on college experiences, a brief description of pre-college characteristics will be given in order to provide context and background but are not explicated in the model, followed by a discussion of the meaning participants made of academics (where academic self-concept and racial identity intersect). I conclude with a discussion of other influences on academic self-concept, specifically significant others, the generalized other, and social comparisons.
MODEL OF HOW SOCIAL SOURCES OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE INFLUENCE THE ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT OF HIGH-ACHIEVING AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

Pre-college
Academic self-concept
Academic socialization
Racial socialization

Social Comparison
GPA
Being a Fellow

Significant Others
Family
Friends
Pressure
Responsibility
Support

Generalized Others
Stereotypes
Fellowship Program
Proving
Refuge
Privilege
Reference Group

Institutional Context

Academic Self-Concept
Academic Meaning
Racial Identity

Moderator: Institutional Context
Pre-College Characteristics

The model proposes that high-achieving African American college students enter college with a positive academic self-concept shaped by various factors. While there are several factors that shape college academic self-concept, what is explicated in the model is academic and racial socialization messages received from family, as these appear to be extremely influential. Prior to and continuing in college, high-achieving African American students receive clear messages about academics and race. These academic socialization (beliefs about the role academics should play in their lives) and racial socialization (what it means to be their race) messages, primarily from family members, influenced and continue to influence the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students in the context of the university setting.

High-achieving African American college students receive strong and clear messages from family members that academics is the key to success and that education is a priority. These messages are internalized as high-achieving African American college students are striving to be successful academically, seeing academics as a “job” and as central to their self-definition. For many high-achieving African American college students racial socialization messages focus on messages that as a Black person they must work harder than a non-Black person to achieve the same success.

Academic and racial socialization messages are intricately linked. Students received messages about the importance of education as the equalizing factor over race, such that having a good education and performing well academically is the overarching
key to success. High-achieving African American college students view academics as an opportunity for them to not only be successful individually in life, but also see it as a means of showing others that African American people can in fact be academically focused and successful.

While high-achieving African American college students also experience negative stereotypes about African Americans and academics and have experienced negative and racist messages from others outside the family, such as peers, the messages received from family that they must work twice as hard and that education is the key to success seems to buffer students from the internalization of these messages. For example, when students receive a negative reflected appraisal in the form of a negative stereotype doubting their ability, the socialization messages received seem to prevent them from falling victim to and believing it. Likewise the reinforcement of these messages through the generalized other in the form of the Fellowship Program seem to allow the students to hold on to the positive messages received, thus positively influencing academic self-concept.

**Academic Self-Concept**

All high-achieving African American college students, regardless of class standing, have very positive academic self-concepts, characterized by a sense that they know they are smart and high-achieving. Although previous research yielded contradictory results about the effect of class standing on the academic self-concept of African American college students (Cokley, 2002b; Reynolds, 1988; Spaights et al., 1986). In the current research, class standing does not influence the academic self-
concept of high-achieving African American college students; it is therefore omitted from the model.

Racial Identity

Closely linked to academic self-concept is another component of self-concept: racial identity. How a student identifies racially and the meaning attached to their racial identity is intricately tied to academic self-concept. For most high-achieving African American college students, race is related to skin color, historical lineage, and a sense of struggle. High-achieving African American college students show pride in their race through academic endeavors such as completing assignments on Black issues, sitting in the front row of classes, and attending a PWI. Showing racial pride is therefore achieved through academic success and pursuits. Because students relate race and academics, these two components of overall self-concept overlap creating a place where the meaning attached to academics is created.

Academic Meaning

The consequence of the relationship of the various sources of self-knowledge influencing academic self-concept results in the place where academic self-concept and racial identity overlap. It is here that the meaning of academics for high-achieving African American college students is found, such that racial identity is often defined through and in terms of academics. High-achieving African American college students
have internalized the academic socialization messages received such that academics and academic pursuits are now a core part of who they see themselves as. Through academics and academic self-perceptions, students find an opportunity to be successful in their personal and professional lives. This is a place where they believe they can compete with others, be proud of who they are individually, as well as collectively (within the African American race). Academics therefore becomes a perceived level playing field and a place where high-achieving African American college students believe that they can compete with others and dispel negative stereotypes about African Americans and academic achievement.

Social Sources of Self-Knowledge Influencing Academic Self-Concept

Based on the model, in the university setting, several factors influence academic self-concept. This research focused specifically on social sources of self-knowledge with the assumption that people get a sense of who they are and what they are like by relying on messages from the social world.

Several social sources of self-knowledge influence the social and academic self-concepts of high-achieving African American college students within the context of a PWI. What people think about themselves is a reflection of how others perceive them. In other words, people gain knowledge about themselves based on the perceptions of others. These social sources of self-knowledge include the reflected appraisals of significant others (particular individuals), the generalized other (society and culture), and the social comparison process.
**Significant others: Family and friends**

For high-achieving African American college students, the role of significant others, most notably family and friends are very influential on academic self-concept. Through the support and encouragement from family and friends, students see themselves reflected positively in the eyes of others, thus positively influencing the perceptions that they have of themselves. While one would suspect that pressure to succeed would negatively influence academic self-concept, the opposite appears to be true, having a positive influence on academic self-concept. This could be because pressure causes students to feel a sense of responsibility to be successful. This sense of responsibility stems from the socialization messages that students receive from family members therefore influencing how they perceive their academic abilities. In addition, having friends who share common goals serve as a support group through which students can identify. Once in college, students are able to find a support group of students who had similar high school experiences (such as being teased for “talking White”) and who have common academic goals.

**Generalized other: Stereotypes and the Fellowship Program**

While high-achieving African American college students are aware of the stereotypes that exist about African Americans and academic achievement, these perceptions do not appear as influential on academic self-concept as other sources. This is possibly due to the academic and racial socialization messages serving as a buffer to negative stereotypes. Prior to entering college, high-achieving African American college
students work hard to prove their academic worth. In college, they work hard to prove that they are not an “affirmative action” case and that they are academically capable of being at the institution and obtaining and maintaining the fellowship. The idea of proving academic competence often manifests itself through the maintenance of academic excellence and not behaving in a manner that will give people a reason to doubt them solely because of race. Pressure from others, most notably family members and possibly an internal desire, to be academically successful, along with pressure to disprove stereotypes is common. While one would expect pressure would cause academic self-concept to lower, “pressure” in fact had the opposite effect, having a positive influence on academic self-concept. Therefore, while students are working hard to prove their competence, they are still able to maintain very positive academic self-concepts.

Another generalized other that influences academic self-concept is the Fellowship Program. The reflected appraisal of the group and being part of the group as a Fellow positively influenced academic self-concept through offering refuge, a place where students could call home where they were able to find others who shared common academic goals. In addition, students feel privileged at being selected as a Fellow and being part of an “elite” group of achievers. The Fellowship Program also provides a reference group through which the social comparison process most often occurs. High-achieving African American college students compare themselves to those in their immediate social circle. For most, this circle is comprised of other African Americans or students of color.
As previously discussed, high-achieving African American college students compare themselves to those in their immediate social circle. For most this group primarily consists of high-achieving students of color stemming from relationships formed their first-year in the residence hall and also from being a Fellow. In addition to comparing themselves to other students, high-achieving African American college students use grade point average as a means of comparison, although it does not appear to have a great influence on academic self-concept.
Chapter 5

Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications

This study explored how the social world influenced the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a predominantly White institution (PWI). The high-achieving African American college students in this study consisted of 10 senior and 7 sophomore students who received an academic fellowship at a large, rural, predominantly White research university in the Northeast. It is important to note that while I recruited a sample of African American students for the current research from the Fellowship Program, students in the Fellowship Program (Fellows) are reflective of the university student population and are not exclusively African American. All participants were 18 years or older and represented a range of academic majors. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research along with a discussion of how the current research relates to previous research, conclusions, and implications for practice and future research.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and develop a model of how social sources of self-knowledge influence the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a PWI. Academic self-concept is what a person thinks of his or her academic ability (Marsh, 1993) and social sources of self-knowledge include to
whom high-achieving African American college students compared themselves academically and how the appraisals of others influenced their academic self-concept. The appraisals of others came from significant others, such as particular individuals, as well as from a generalized other, meaning society and culture. The role of racial identity, a component of self-concept, was also explored. The following research question guided this study: How do social sources of self-knowledge influence, both positively and negatively, the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American students at a PWI?

Few studies exist that specifically explore the academic self-concept of African American college students at PWIs, particularly as it relates to high-achieving African American college students. Much of the research on academic self-concept is quantitative and explores the relationship between academic self-concept and factors such as institutional context, motivational factors, class standing, gender, significant others, and racial identity of African Americans at predominantly White institutions and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Previous research examined what factors affect academic-self-concept. This research sought to understand how the social world influences academic self-concept. In addition, previous studies do not explore the social comparison process nor do they focus specifically on a population that is often understudied, high-achieving African American college students. The current research bridged the gap in the literature on the academic self-concept of African American college students and the research on the experiences of high-achieving African American college students at PWIs by using social psychological theories of the self to explore qualitatively how the social world influences academic self-concept.
I employed qualitative research methods to answer the research question, informed by the grounded theory and phenomenological traditions. Grounded theory involves the generation of a theory from data that has been systematically collected and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As the end-result of this research was the generation of a theory grounded in the data of how sources of self-knowledge influence the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students, grounded theory methodology and methods were used. In addition, a phenomenological perspective informed this study. Phenomenology explores the essence of individuals’ lived experiences, and focuses on individuals’ perception of reality, and the way the world appears to them (Creswell, 1998). Exploring people’s perceptions of their academic abilities is inherently phenomenological, because it is concerned with individuals’ perceptions and beliefs of what they are like as opposed to what they are really like (Brown, 1998).

To collect data, two semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with participants. The first interview was used to build rapport with the participants and to collect background information about the participants, their pre-college experiences, with a specific focus on gathering details about the social influences on their academic self-concept prior to coming to the university. The second interview examined the social factors that influenced the participants’ academic self-concept since they have been at the university. In this interview, the participants were also asked to reflect on the meaning of the influences on their academic self-concept. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes.
As the Fellowship Program emerged as an influence on academic self-concept and because specific information about the program was not made available to the general public and to gain a better understanding of the program details, I met with and interviewed the two co-directors of the program in addition to meeting with several multicultural directors at the university. This additional information about the program offered a richer understanding of the nature of the program, criteria, and parameters for participation in the program.

In addition to the multiple interviews, I attended and observed several of the activities coordinated by the program for all students who were Fellows. During these observations, I systematically took field notes that I reviewed after the activity and during the analysis process. These observations included participating in the two-day retreat for first-year Fellows, attending several class sessions of the first-year seminar Fellows were required to enroll in, and attending programs planned in the residence hall where the Fellows lived their first year that all residents were required to attend.

With the participants’ permission, interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using many of the tools employed in the grounded theory tradition. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method to ensure saturation and involved collecting and comparing data to emerging categories until no new information was found that would produce categories (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Coding was used to analyze the data and took place in a series of steps, beginning with open coding, followed by axial coding and selective coding.

Based on the findings from the data analysis, I present a model (see chapter 4 for a copy of the model) that explains how the social world influences the academic self-
concept of high-achieving African American college students at a PWI. Because this research focused on college experiences, a brief description of pre-college characteristics will be given in order to provide context and background but are not explicated in the model, followed by a discussion of the meaning participants made of academics (where academic self-concept and racial identity intersect). I conclude with a discussion of other influences on academic self-concept, specifically significant others, the generalized other, and social comparisons.

Model of How the Social World Influences the Academic Self-Concept of High-Achieving African American College Students at a Predominantly White Institution

Pre-College Characteristics

The model proposes that high-achieving African American college students enter college with a positive academic self-concept shaped by various factors. While there are several factors that shape college academic self-concept, what is explicated in the model is academic and racial socialization messages received from family, as these appear to be extremely influential. Prior to and continuing in college, high-achieving African American students receive clear messages about academics and race. These academic socialization (beliefs about the role academics should play in their lives) and racial socialization (what it means to be their race) messages, primarily from family members, influenced and continue to influence the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students in the context of the university setting.
High-achieving African American college students receive strong and clear messages from family members that academics is the key to success and that education is a priority. These messages are internalized as high-achieving African American college students are striving to be successful academically, seeing academics as a “job” and as central to their self-definition. For many high-achieving African American college students racial socialization messages focus on messages that as a Black person they must work harder than a non-Black person to achieve the same success.

Academic and racial socialization messages are intricately linked. Students received messages about the importance of education as the equalizing factor over race, such that having a good education and performing well academically is the overarching key to success. High-achieving African American college students view academics as an opportunity for them to not only be successful individually in life, but also see it as a means of showing others that African American people can in fact be academically focused and successful.

While high-achieving African American college students also experience negative stereotypes about African Americans and academics and have experienced negative and racist messages from others outside the family, such as peers, the messages received from family that they must work twice as hard and that education is the key to success seems to buffer students from the internalization of these messages. For example, when students receive a negative reflected appraisal in the form of a negative stereotype doubting their ability, the socialization messages received seem to prevent them from falling victim to and believing it. Likewise the reinforcement of these messages through the generalized
other in the form of the Fellowship Program seem to allow the students to hold on to the positive messages received, thus positively influencing academic self-concept.

**Academic Self-Concept**

All high-achieving African American college students, regardless of class standing, have very positive academic self-concepts, characterized by a sense that they know they are smart and high-achieving. Although previous research yielded contradictory results about the effect of class standing on the academic self-concept of African American college students (Cokley, 2002b; Reynolds, 1988; Spaights et al., 1986). In the current research, class standing does not influence the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students; it is therefore omitted from the model.

**Racial Identity**

Closely linked to academic self-concept is another component of self-concept: racial identity. How a student identifies racially and the meaning attached to their racial identity is intricately tied to academic self-concept. For most high-achieving African American college students, race is related to skin color, historical lineage, and a sense of struggle. High-achieving African American college students show pride in their race through academic endeavors such as completing assignments on Black issues, sitting in the front row of classes, and attending a PWI. Showing racial pride is therefore achieved
through academic success and pursuits. Because students relate race and academics, these two components of overall self-concept overlap creating a place where the meaning attached to academics is created.

**Academic Meaning**

The consequence of the relationship of the various sources of self-knowledge influencing academic self-concept results in the place where academic self-concept and racial identity overlap. It is here that the meaning of academics for high-achieving African American college students is found, such that racial identity is often defined through and in terms of academics. High-achieving African American college students have internalized the academic socialization messages received such that academics and academic pursuits are now a core part of who they see themselves as. Through academics and academic self-perceptions, students find an opportunity to be successful in their personal and professional lives. This is a place where they believe they can compete with others, be proud of who they are individually, as well as collectively (within the African American race). Academics therefore becomes a perceived level playing field and a place where high-achieving African American college students believe that they can compete with others and dispel negative stereotypes about African Americans and academic achievement.
Social Sources of Self-Knowledge Influencing Academic Self-Concept

Based on the model, in the university setting, several factors influence academic self-concept. This research focused specifically on social sources of self-knowledge with the assumption that people get a sense of who they are and what they are like by relying on messages from the social world.

Several social sources of self-knowledge influence the social and academic self-concepts of high-achieving African American college students within the context of a PWI. What people think about themselves is a reflection of how others perceive them. In other words, people gain knowledge about themselves based on the perceptions of others. These social sources of self-knowledge include the reflected appraisals of significant others (particular individuals), the generalized other (society and culture), and the social comparison process.

**Significant others: Family and friends**

For high-achieving African American college students, the role of significant others, most notably family and friends are very influential on academic self-concept. Through the support and encouragement from family and friends, students see themselves reflected positively in the eyes of others, thus positively influencing the perceptions that they have of themselves. While one would suspect that pressure to succeed would negatively influence academic self-concept, the opposite appears to be true, having a positive influence on academic self-concept. This could be because pressure causes students to feel a sense of responsibility to be successful. This sense of responsibility
stems from the socialization messages that students receive from family members therefore influencing how they perceive their academic abilities. In addition, having friends who share common goals serve as a support group through which students can identify. Once in college, students are able to find a support group of students who had similar high school experiences (such as being teased for “talking White”) and who have common academic goals.

Generalized other: Stereotypes and the Fellowship Program

While high-achieving African American college students are aware of the stereotypes that exist about African Americans and academic achievement, these perceptions do not appear as influential on academic self-concept as other sources. This is possibly due to the academic and racial socialization messages serving as a buffer to negative stereotypes. Prior to entering college, high-achieving African American college students work hard to prove their academic worth. In college, they work hard to prove that they are not an “affirmative action” case and that they are academically capable of being at the institution and obtaining and maintaining the fellowship. The idea of proving academic competence often manifests itself through the maintenance of academic excellence and not behaving in a manner that will give people a reason to doubt them solely because of race. Pressure from others, most notably family members and possibly an internal desire, to be academically successful, along with pressure to disprove stereotypes is common. While one would expect pressure would cause academic self-concept to lower, “pressure” in fact had the opposite effect, having a positive influence
Another generalized other that influences academic self-concept is the Fellowship Program. The reflected appraisal of the group and being part of the group as a Fellow positively influenced academic self-concept through offering refuge, a place where students could call home where they were able to find others who shared common academic goals. In addition, students feel privileged at being selected as a Fellow and being part of an “elite” group of achievers. The Fellowship Program also provides a reference group through which the social comparison process most often occurs. High-achieving African American college students compare themselves to those in their immediate social circle. For most, this circle is comprised of other African Americans or students of color.

**Social comparison**

As previously discussed, high-achieving African American college students compare themselves to those in their immediate social circle. For most this group primarily consists of high-achieving students of color stemming from relationships formed their first-year in the residence hall and also from being a Fellow. In addition to comparing themselves to other students, high-achieving African American college students use grade point average as a means of comparison, although it does not appear to have a great influence on academic self-concept.
Discussion

One of the primary positive influences on academic self-concept is the support and encouragement of significant others, most notably, family and friends and the generalized other in the form of the Fellowship Program. While students are keenly aware that people at the university question their academic competence and they work hard to prove that they are deserving of being at the university and a Fellow, this does not appear to negatively influence their academic self-concept. Students are still able to maintain high academic standards while also maintaining high academic self-perceptions.

Some might argue that in the conditions that these students face, they might be subject to experiencing stereotype threat, “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (Steele, 1999, p. 46). The theory proposes that a test of diagnostic ability combined with a stereotype cause a threat that, in turn, causes an individual’s performance to decrease. Performance decrease is possibly the result of several factors, such as anxiety, evaluation apprehension, or frustration (Steele, 1997). In the domain of academics, one possible negative effect of stereotype threat is disidentification, “the psychological disengagement from achievement hypothesized to help students cope with stereotype threat and underperformance in a given domain” (Aronson et al., 2002, p. 114). Long term, disidentification can affect individuals such that they no longer value the threatened domain and as such, it is no longer a part of their self-identity. With academics, it is implied that academic self-concept is low because academics is no longer a part of the person’s self-concept.
In the case of participants in the current research, the negative effects of stereotype threat do not appear to occur. This could be because of the influence of a generalized other in the form of the Fellowship Program. Through the participation in the Fellowship Program and their identification as a “Fellow”, participants are able to overcome any negative effects of stereotype threat on their academic self-concept.

Because stereotype threat is a situational threat and not an internalized threat, it is somewhat easier to reverse or prevent its negative consequences through situational changes. For example, stereotype threatened individuals should focus on another identity rather than the threatened identity (Croizet, Desert, Dutrevis, & Leyens, 2001). This appears to be what occurred with participants. As one of the co-directors of the Fellowship Program indicated, within the context of the residence hall (a scholarly diverse living/learning environment that houses a special living option for first-year students in science and engineering and the Fellows), all residents are expected to be scholars. The residents are given a common goal from the first day – to achieve Dean’s List (3.5 GPA). This is the expectation for all students and that is what the programming for the residence hall focuses on. In addition to the experiences within the context of the residence hall, Fellows have separate activities all with an academic focus with the underlying message of academic success. This is very similar to the academic socialization messages received from family members prior to entering college. In this case, identifying as a Fellow allows participants to see themselves reflected in a positive light because as Fellows, the expectation is set that they are scholars. In addition, because Fellows’ academic performance determines their success or failure as a Fellow, it is critical that they have
high academic standards for themselves because if their grades fall below satisfactory progress for the program, students may lose their award.

The primary focus of the Fellowship Program is on academic excellence and being a scholar. Because of this and the fact that for many participants the current research, race was merely skin color, some might argue that there is an aspect of racelessness to the Fellowship Program (Fordham, 1988, 1996). This does not appear to be the case in the current research. While Fellows are given the common goal of academic success and it is the academic identity that is focused on, underlying all of the programmatic efforts, there is race. For example, the program is designed to enhance the diversity of the campus, as such Fellows come from very diverse backgrounds and are aware of the history of the program. Within the context of the programmed activities for the Fellows, there is a conscious effort to bring in diverse speakers (most notably in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity). This occurs done so that students can see themselves reflected positively, with the speakers serving as role models for students. Through their interaction with the speakers and others associated with the program, participants are able to see professionals who look like them who are successful in their respective fields. This shows students the possibilities that exist for them to achieve. In addition, the majority of administrators involved with the program are people of color who also serve as role models for students. There is also a component of the first-year seminar that all Fellows are required to take that addresses the issue of race and racial identity. In this sense, race is infused within the program and students receive subtle messages.

In addition to focusing on another identity to reduce stereotype threat, Steele (1997) proposes the use of “wise” schooling. Wise schooling calls for situational changes
in school design such that students will not believe that they are held under the suspicion of negative stereotypes about their group (Steele, 1992, 1997, 1999). While “wisedom” is a reasonable solution, it alone may not be enough to counteract the effects of stereotype threat if the student does not identify with the domain of academics (Steele, 1997).

Therefore, it is important to “triage” students by ensuring the right services are given to the right students. For example, if students are identified with school and they are placed in programs that assume weak identification and poor skills it could actually “increase stereotype threat and underperformance by signaling that their abilities are held under suspicion because of their group membership” (Steele, 1997, p. 624). In the case of participants in the current research (high-achieving African American college students) they were all domain identified with academics and part of a Fellowship Program that assumes that they will be academically successful and scholars.

The characteristics of wise schooling for both identified and unidentified students include building optimistic teacher-student relationships, stressing challenge over remediation, and stressing the malleability of intelligence (Steele, 1997). For students who are school identified, as those participants in the current research, it is important to affirm the student based on their intelligence, value multiple perspectives, and provide role models. For those students who are not identified with school, it is critical to provide nonjudgmental responses and to build self-efficacy in school (Steele, 1997).

The findings of the current research support the benefits of incorporating the strategies of wise schooling. By setting the expectation that Fellows are admitted to the university because of their academic abilities and that they are expected to be scholars, integrating them into a scholarly diverse living learning community, and providing role
models, the Fellowship Program has implemented many of the characteristics of wise schooling. Each of these components appears to be present in the Fellowship Program having a positive influence on academic self-concept.

While high-achieving African American college students may have positive academic self-concepts, there are sometimes conflicts that arise between academic self-concept and their social self-concept, specifically, racial identity (Ford, 1996; Ford et al., 1994; Fries-Britt, 2000; Tatum, 1997). As a result of this conflict, high-achievers may hide their academic ability in order to fit in with their Black peers (Feagin et al., 1996; Ford, 1996; Ogbu, 1990; Tatum, 1997). In contrast to the literature on high-achieving African American college students, participants in the current study did not hide their academic ability. They worked hard to show others that they were academically competent. Participants’ academic and racial identity intersected, thus they were able to find a place where they defined themselves racially through academics. For these students, this seemed to alleviate any conflict that might arise. In addition, because they were around other high-achieving students of color and subsequently chose to form close relationships with each other, they were surrounded by others who were like them. As a result, the conflict did not appear to exist because there was no need to hide their academic ability because they were around others who were equally if not more academically successful than they were. This was different from high school where students appeared to have more of a challenge integrating their academic self-concept and racial identity. This could possibly be because they often found themselves not fitting in with other African Americans, while still trying to prove their academic abilities to others. Similar to high school, they continued to be the only or one of few students of
color in their classes, but the difference once in college appears to be that they were able
to form a social network of other high-achieving students of color who were similar to
themselves. As a result, the conflict did not appear to be as relevant.

Most high-achieving African American college students compare themselves to
other high-achieving students of color while still maintaining a high academic self-
concept. This is contrary to the Big Fish Little Pond Effect (BFLPE). This effect “occurs
when equally able students have lower academic self-concepts when they compare
themselves to more able students, and higher academic self-concepts when they compare
themselves with less able students” (Marsh, 1990, p. 124). If this were to hold true, we
would see a decline in academic self-concept as students progressed in their academic
careers as a Fellow, but this is not the case. Students often compare themselves to other
students in their reference group, which were most often other Fellows or others who
were not Fellows but were academically successful. In making this comparison, students
still maintain a high academic self-concept. Marsh (1993) suggests that research further
explore if a specific other or generalized other provides a means of comparison. For these
students comparisons are made to a generalized other, meaning the Fellows. Students use
the Fellows as their reference group to know that they are high-achieving. The contrary
findings could be occurring because instead of viewing the Fellows as their competition
in a negative sense, students viewed it as more of a “friendly competition” and while
students wanted to achieve individual success, they also had a strong communal sense of
achievement.
Conclusions

Based on the findings, several conclusions can be reached about how the social world influences the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students at a PWI.

1. Academic socialization and racial socialization messages continue to influence all of the academic experiences and academic self-concepts of high-achieving African American college students prior to college and once in college. Academic and racial socialization messages from significant others seem to counter and serve as a buffer to negative stereotypes. While messages are not communicated once in college, they appear to have been internalized and are recalled in the daily lives of the students.

2. A generalized other in the form of a structured group that provides academic, social, and residential components and reinforces an identity of a scholar can be very influential for maintaining a positive academic self-concept. In the case of the current research, being a Fellow validates that high-achieving African American students are in fact “high-achieving”. This finding contradicts the literature that states that for African American at PWIs, GPA is the strongest predictor of academic self-concept (Cokley, 2000). Similar to students who attend HBCUs, significant others (Cokley, 2003b), and in the case of the current research, a generalized other, seem to be more influential on academic self-concept. This could be because although students are at a PWI, the various residential and academic components of the Fellowship Program, give students a feeling of being at an HBCU as they are surrounded by so many other students of color through their living environment and social support systems. Being surrounded by other high-
achieving students of color has a positive influence on academic self-concept. Not only was living in the residence hall with other academically successful students of color different from their experiences in high school where they were often the only African American person in their classes, but it served as a means of motivation, encouragement, and support. Students enjoyed being around other academically successful students and being part of an “elite” group. The residence hall became a home away from home, a family. For these students, seeing themselves positively reflected in their living environment had a positive influence on academic self-concept and adjustment that continues through their academic career. The residence hall therefore became a safe haven, a home away from home.

Tatum (1997) noted that African American students who attend “historically Black colleges and universities achieve higher academic performance, enjoy greater social involvement, and aspire to higher occupational goals than their peers do at predominantly White colleges” (p. 79). Based on this, it would stand to reason that for African American students at predominately White institutions, “having a place to be rejuvenated and to feel anchored in one’s cultural community increases the possibility that one will have the energy to achieve academically as well as participate in the cross-group dialogue and interaction many colleges want to encourage” (Tatum, 1997, p. 80). In addition, “Black students in racially segregated schools (predominantly Black schools) have higher self-concepts than Black students in racially integrated settings (Ford, 1996, p. 109). The residential component of the Fellowship Program provides such an environment.
3. Proximity determines who high-achieving African American college students compare themselves to. In most instances, high-achieving African American college students compare themselves to other high-achieving minority students, which is different from high school, while still maintaining a positive academic self-concept. In high school, high-achieving African American college students were often the only person of color in their honors and advanced placement courses, hence the comparison to Whites. At a PWI, being part of a Fellowship Program that is reflective of the university student population, as well as living in a scholarly diverse living and learning environment, provides a generalized other to whom high-achieving African American college students socialize most with and ultimately identify as their reference group. Interestingly, although high-achieving African American college students view this reference group as their competition, there remains a communal sense of wanting everyone in the reference group to be successful.

4. High-achieving African American college students are able to maintain a positive academic self-concept regardless of feeling pressure to be academically successful, working hard to prove their academic competence, or grade point average. While one would suspect that pressure and proving would cause students to doubt their academic abilities, this was not the case.

5. High-achieving African American college students’ racial identity and academic self-concept intersect. It is in this place that high-achieving African American college students show racial pride through academic pursuits and academic excellence.
Implications for Practice

Based on the findings, there are several implications for practice that should be considered:

1. Parents and family members should be aware of the messages they send about the role of academics and race in lives of their students. For the students in the current research, messages most often centered on students being aware that discrimination exists and that academics is important for future success. Participants in the study consistently received subtle and overt messages and although they were not necessarily appreciated or understood when they were young, students understood and appreciated the lessons their family members taught them once in college. Students use these messages in their daily lives and recalling these messages influence how they respond to significant and generalized others thereby influencing academic self-concept and racial identity. As a result, they are able to maintain a positive academic self-concept regardless of any negative messages they might receive from others.

2. Colleges and universities should provide a generalized other that can mimic the influence of family for students. As friends and the Fellowship program emerged as playing a large role in providing a positive reflected appraisal, it would be worthwhile to provide organized opportunities for students of color to live, socialize, and interact with other students of color who share similar academic aspirations, motivations, and goals. Colleges and universities should create opportunities where diverse groups of students are able to work towards a common academic goal together, as was evident in the residential component of the Fellowship Program. As a result of the overarching goal of
being a scholar, students were able to work toward a common goal. In addition, organized opportunities for diverse groups of people to interact should be created so that students can get to know each other on a personal level. The residential component of the Fellowship Program allows students to live, socialize, and study with other high-achieving students of color during their first year, early in their academic careers. This is particularly important for those students who attended high schools that were not predominantly African American. Seeing others like themselves allowed them to see themselves reflected in a positive academic light. It also provided a means to dispel negative stereotypes that they might hold themselves, as well as the stereotypes others might hold about African Americans and academic achievement. The various residential and academic components of the Fellowship Program also provide a reference group for social comparison. As such, universities should strive to create scholarly diverse living learning environments for all students that have students working toward a common goal while instilling a common identity of a scholar. This message should be communicated verbally and reinforced through programmatic efforts that focus on the common goal of academic success and the provision of role models who have similar racial and ethnic backgrounds.

3. Academic self-concept and racial identity intersect to create a place where high-achieving African American college students attach meaning to academics and define academic self-concept through racial identity. As a result, colleges and universities must recognize that high-achieving African American college students’ view of their academic abilities is tied to their view of their race and take this into consideration when working with students. It is also important for administrators to be aware that African
American students are exploring their racial identity and that each student attaches a different meaning to their race. Designing a curriculum and co-curricular activities that consider this would be beneficial to the growth and development of all students.

**Implications for Research and Limitations**

Based on the current research, there are several areas that warrant further exploration. For example, as I explored the academic self-concept of students who participated in a particular Fellowship Program and the Fellowship Program emerged as one of the major influences on academic self-concept, future research might explore the academic self-concept of students at several different institutions who are academically successful who are not part of a specific academic or residential program. Studying high-achieving African American college students who are successful without participation in any type of organized academic or residential activity will allow researchers to explore further the role of significant and generalized others, as well as the comparison process. In addition, as the sample was predominantly female, gender differences were not explored. Having a sample with greater gender diversity might allow researchers to examine possible gender differences that exist in academic self-concept. Also, because participants self-selected for the study, those who did not self-select might have different experiences. Lastly, the fact that I worked with the Fellowship Program and worked closely with many of the participants might have had an impact on participant responses. Through a qualitative design, this study sought to understand how social sources of self-knowledge influence the academic self-concept of high-achieving African
American college students at a PWI. There is limited information about the development of high-achieving African American college students in college. Much of the information available about African American students in college focuses on underachieving or under-prepared students. This lack of information available about high-achieving African American college students may suggest that most African American students are not academically prepared (Fries-Britt, 2002). As a result, many high-achieving African American college students encounter stereotypes that question their intellectual ability. In addition, this lack of research may lead others to believe that there are not academically successful African American students; this has implications not only for the types of policies and services implemented at universities and colleges, but also for the African American community. If people do not see themselves represented, then it becomes difficult to believe in the possibilities that exist and that they can achieve.

We need to understand better how the academic self-concept of high-achieving African American college students is influenced. By studying this population, we can understand how various factors contribute to the development of a positive academic self-concept. Having this knowledge will not only ensure the continued success of high-achieving African American college students, but might also assist those who are not academically successful, thus possibly decreasing the achievement gap.


196


The Penn State data warehouse, student database. (2005).


Stevenson, H. C., Cameron, R., Herrero-Taylor, T., & Davis, G. Y. (2002). Development of the teenager experience of racial socialization scale: Correlates of race-related


Appendix A

Preliminary Conceptual Framework of Social Influences on the Academic Self-Concept of High-Achieving African American College Students at a PWI

Pre-college Academic Self-concept of High-Achieving African American Students & Pre-college Characteristics

Social Sources of Self-Knowledge

Institutional Context

Academic Self-Concept of High-Achieving African American College Students at a PWI
Appendix B

Recruitment Script

My name is Tara Scales, and I am a doctoral candidate in Higher Education in the College of Education. I am also a graduate assistant in the Office of Science Diversity Initiatives and the program coordinator for the Bunton-Waller Fellows Program. I am undertaking a study to examine how the development of an academic identity is influenced for high-achieving African American college students. I am seeking students from your program to participate in this project. Participation would include two interviews (each lasting about 60 minutes) during Fall 2005. To thank you for your participation, you will be compensated with $5.00 for each interview.

I am seeking students who are:

- Sophomores and Seniors, 18 years of age or older, African American, Bunton-Waller Fellows

Please sign up TWO times for your individual interviews. Each of your interviews should be scheduled at a minimum 3 days apart. If you cannot make any of the interview times listed, please see me so alternate arrangements can be made.

Please arrive 5-10 minutes prior to your scheduled interview time, come to 425 Thomas Building, and ask for Tara Scales.

I would be very happy to answer any questions you might have right now or at a later date. I can be reached at 425 Thomas Building, 863-0285, tcscales@psu.edu.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!
## Appendix C

### Participant Summary

#### Sophomores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Academic Self-concept</th>
<th>H.S. GPA</th>
<th>Coll. GPA</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Minor</th>
<th>Dad Education</th>
<th>Mom Education</th>
<th>1 or 2 Parent Household</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
<th>Career Goals</th>
<th>Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antoinette</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>academically driven</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>2 older sister</td>
<td>Gaithersburg, MD</td>
<td>business career</td>
<td>African American or Black</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Cierra</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>doing pretty well, staying above average</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Secondary Education (English)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>2 younger brothers</td>
<td>Williamsport, PA</td>
<td>Graduate school</td>
<td>Mixed (African American &amp; White)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Crystal</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>less now, unbounded in right environment</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>Wildlife</td>
<td>Animal science, Int'l Politics, Spanish</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Raised only child</td>
<td>Burtonsville, MD</td>
<td>Professional school</td>
<td>African American &amp; Native American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>more of a hard working student</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>Bio-behavioral Health</td>
<td>Neuro-science</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>GED, Some College</td>
<td>1 older brother</td>
<td>Trenton, NJ</td>
<td>Medical School</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Jazz</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>has to do well in school</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>Animal Science</td>
<td>Wildlife &amp; Fisheries Science</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>1 older sister</td>
<td>Queens, NY</td>
<td>Veterinary School</td>
<td>Black Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>above average, but has to work at it</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Spanish (possibly)</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>2 older brother</td>
<td>Washington, DC</td>
<td>Graduate School</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>age</td>
<td>academic self-concept</td>
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<td>coll. GPA</td>
<td>major</td>
<td>minor</td>
<td>dad education</td>
<td>mom education</td>
<td>1 or 2 parent household</td>
<td>siblings</td>
<td>hometown</td>
<td>career goals</td>
<td>race</td>
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<td>Kevin</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>good student</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>meteorology</td>
<td>math (possibly)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>high school</td>
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<td>Maywood, IL</td>
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<td>African American</td>
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<td>Michelle</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>hard working student</td>
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<td>3.93</td>
<td>political science</td>
<td>history</td>
<td>bachelor</td>
<td>master's</td>
<td>younger sister</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cheltenham, PA</td>
<td>law school</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serena</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>academic ability has been tested</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>microbiology (changing to crime, law, and justice)</td>
<td>African and African American studies</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>master's</td>
<td>2 raised an only child</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Miami, Fl</td>
<td>law school</td>
<td>African American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zaire</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>same as high school, doing pretty well</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>hospitality mgmt.</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>high school</td>
<td>high school</td>
<td>2 younger sisters</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Amityville, NY</td>
<td>hospitality career</td>
<td>Haitian (Black)</td>
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### Seniors

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<th>pseudonym</th>
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<th>coll. GPA</th>
<th>major</th>
<th>minor</th>
<th>dad education</th>
<th>mom education</th>
<th>1 or 2 parent household</th>
<th>siblings</th>
<th>hometown</th>
<th>career goals</th>
<th>race</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>high achiever, I'm in the honors college</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>economics</td>
<td>Spanish and int’l business</td>
<td>high school</td>
<td>high school</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>younger sister and brother</td>
<td>Canandaigua, NY</td>
<td>accepted to graduate school</td>
<td>Black and Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>assertive student, very academically focused</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>science and Spanish (switched from statistics)</td>
<td>dance</td>
<td>some college</td>
<td>master's</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>older and younger brother</td>
<td>Newark, DE</td>
<td>accepted to medical school</td>
<td>Black or African American (depends on day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>same as high school, if works, can always beat the average, is less academically capable</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>sociology (changed from engineering)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>graduate school</td>
<td>graduate school</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>younger sister and brother</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>accepted to law school</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>strong student</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>public relations and Spanish</td>
<td>int’l studies</td>
<td>law school</td>
<td>some college</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>older brother</td>
<td>Cheltenham, PA</td>
<td>law school</td>
<td>Black</td>
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<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>came with a lot of potential</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>2.98 *</td>
<td>biobehavioral health (changed from material science engineering)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>doctorate</td>
<td>master's</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>older sister</td>
<td>New Orleans, LA</td>
<td>medical school</td>
<td>African American or Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Academic Self-concept</td>
<td>H.S. GPA</td>
<td>Coll. GPA</td>
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<td>Dad Education</td>
<td>Mom Education</td>
<td>1 or 2 Parent Household</td>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>Hometown</td>
<td>Career Goals</td>
<td>Race</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leroy</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>doesn't work too hard, B student</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.00 *</td>
<td>mechanical engineering</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>high school</td>
<td>associates</td>
<td>1 (dad died at 13)</td>
<td>2 older brothers, 1 older sister, 1 younger sister</td>
<td>Pittsburgh, PA</td>
<td>unsure - industry or graduate school</td>
<td>Black &amp; Native American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>continuing to be a scholar</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>labor and industrial relations</td>
<td>business &amp; dispute mgmt. resolution</td>
<td>bachelor</td>
<td>high school</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 older brothers, 1 older sister, 1 younger sister</td>
<td>Philadelphia, PA</td>
<td>accepted to graduate school</td>
<td>African American or Black</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* on academic probation by the Fellowship Program
Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Interview #1

Tell me who you were academically prior to attending college and how did you get that way? Probes:

- Academics – gifted/honors programs
- School demographics
- Co-curricular activities – e.g., leadership, community service
- Family – socioeconomic status, who was in the household growing up, 1 or 2 parent household, parent occupation

What did you think of your academic ability?

What/who influenced those perceptions?

Who did you compare yourself to?

What messages did you get from your family about academics?

Tell me about your friends – race, what did you do together.

If someone were to ask you what race you are, what would you say?

What does it mean to be your race?

How do you show pride in your race?

What messages did you receive about race (your race, other people’s race, racism) from your family?
Interview #2

How did you choose to attend this institution? *

How did you feel when you found out that you received the Fellowship? *

Have you received any other scholarship or fellowships? *

Tell me who you are academically since you have been in college and how did you get that way?

What is your major and how did you select your major? *

What are your career plans? *

Do you have any plans for graduate/professional school? *

What do you think of your academic abilities?

Who/what influences your academic perceptions?

Who do you compare yourself to academically?

Did you apply to the Honors College? Why or why not? *

How would you characterize your academic experiences in college?

How important is it for you to succeed academically?

Tell me about your friends at college – what do you together, racial makeup?

Tell me about any extracurricular activities you are involved in.

If someone were to ask you what race you are, what would you say?

What does it mean to be your race?

How do you show pride in your race?

Are you aware of any racial incidents that have occurred at the university? *

How are you different since you have enrolled at the university?

Tell me about your family’s role in your life since you have been in college.
What does it mean to you to be a Fellow?

What have your experiences been in the program – pros/cons? *

Tell me about experiences in the residence hall your first year. *

Given what you told me about your academic life before college and what you have told me about your academic life since you have been in college, how do you understand academics in your life?

* Denotes questions added to the interview protocol by the Fellowship Program directors to assist in program evaluation. Responses to these questions may or may not have been analyzed directly.
Appendix E

Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: High-achieving African American College Students and the Development of an Academic Self-Concept

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Investigator:</th>
<th>Advisor:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tara C. Scales</td>
<td>Dr. Robert D. Reason</td>
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<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:rreason@psu.edu">rreason@psu.edu</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to examine how family, friends, and racial identity influence the development of an academic self-concept for high-achieving African American college students.

Procedures to be followed: Two or three interviews will be conducted and audio taped over the course of Fall 2005 and Spring 2006. Each will consist of questions about your experiences as a student, and how you think these experiences have influenced the development of your academic self-concept.

Audio-taping will be used:
- Tapes will be stored in the principal investigator’s office;
- Tapes will be destroyed by August 31, 2006;
- The principal investigator and faculty advisor will have access to the tapes; a professional transcriptionist may help with transcription of the interviews.

Discomforts and Risks: There is minimal likelihood of risk. The interview topic involves race, family, and academics, which may be perceived by some as sensitive.

Benefits: This project will assist colleges and universities to design effective academic experiences for students that may lead to improved academic performance.

Duration/Time: Two or three interviews will be conducted with each interview lasting approximately one hour.
Statement of Confidentiality: The confidentiality of your responses is assured. There will not be identifiable information published throughout this research process of any participants. The Office for Research Protections may review records related to this project.

Right to Ask Questions: You can ask questions about this research. Contact the principal investigator (contact information listed above) with questions. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, contact The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775.

Compensation: Participants will be paid $5.00 at the completion of each interview.

Voluntary Participation: Participation is strictly voluntary and participants may withdraw from this project at any time. Participants can decline to answer specific questions during the interview process.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below. You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form for your records.

__________________________   _____________________   ____________
Participant Name (please print)   Participant Signature   Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

_________________________________   ____________________________________
Investigator Signature   Date
Appendix F

Data Sheet

IRB # 20153

Pseudonym _______________________________________________________

Class Standing ___________________________________________________

Gender ___________________ Age _________________________

Race/ Ethnicity __________________________________________________

Mother’s Race _______________ Father’s Race _______________

Father’s Highest Educational Level ________________________________

Mother’s Highest Educational Level _______________________________

Major __________________________________________________________

Minor _________________________________________________________

Hometown ______________________________________________________

Current GPA _______________ High School GPA ______________

Please list scholarships/fellowships received:

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________
Tara C. Scales

M.A., Counseling, Montclair State University, 2002

Experience

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
Coordinator Multicultural Programs, Science Diversity Initiatives, August 2005 – August 2006
Research Assistant, Center for the Study of Higher Education, August 2002 – August 2005
Teaching Assistant, Department of Education Policy Studies, January 2005 – May 2005
Adviser, First-Year Testing, Counseling, and Advising Program, Summer 2003 - 2005

Montclair State University, Upper Montclair, NJ
Academic Adviser, New Student Orientation, May 2002 – August 2002
Counselor, Program for Academic and Student Support, August 2000 – May 2002
Program Evaluator, Department of Tutorial Services, January 2002 – May 2002
Research Assistant, Educational Foundations Department, January 2001 – May 2001

Publications


Selected Grants

Africana Research Center (2004 – 2005): “Predictors of Stigma Consciousness In Ethnic Minority First-Year College Students At Predominantly White Institutions”

College of Education Alumni Society Graduate Student Research Initiation Grant (2004-2005): “High-Achieving African American College Students and the Development of an Academic Self-Concept”

Selected Presentations

