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Black Online, Doctoral Psychology Graduates' Academic Achievement: A Phenomenological Self-Directed Learning Perspective

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Abstract

Guided by the conceptual framework of self-directed learning and culture, this study investigated the effectiveness of Title IV private, for-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs). Little research has examined this topic, which is problematic considering the disproportionate rate of student loan defaults experienced by Black FPCU borrowers. A phenomenological design was used to explore the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate in psychology through an FPCU. This study specifically examined how Black students experience the completion of doctoral psychology programs at 2 FPCUs and what factors contributed to these students finishing their degrees. A unique-criterion-purposive sample of 7 Black students who completed doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs within the past 5 years was recruited to participate in telephone interviews. Moustakas' data analysis steps were applied to the data. The results indicated that study participants saw an association between attaining their doctorates in psychology and their self-actualization. They shared the experiences of selecting a suitable FPCU, choosing a specialty area, negotiating transfer credits, completing the doctoral coursework phase, and completing the dissertation phase. Their commitment to achieving self-actualization was a salient experience in finishing their degrees. A core aspect of self-actualization was their cultural knowledge, which helped them to overcome challenges and persevere. However, the results uncovered some insufficiencies in the FPCUs' practices. They have implications for positive social change by highlighting how FPCU academic support services might use cultural knowledge and self-actualization strategies to maximize the successful matriculation of Black students.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to the matriarchs and patriarchs within my genealogy and to those who fought hard and paid the ultimate price, paving the way and struggling endlessly so that this day would come for me. Thank you for enduring with me in your hearts, minds, souls, and spirits, and I appreciate your courage, sacrifice, and selflessness. These have been significant motivators throughout my life. I also dedicate this work to the aspiring teen who has become discouraged because of an unplanned pregnancy and to the online psychology doctoral learner who is struggling in making the transition to the role of the independent researcher. I confronted the same discouragement and struggle when I was a teen who had aspirations, dreams, hopes, and then became pregnant, and as an online doctoral psychology learner who was making the transition to the role of the independent researcher. Your aspirations, dreams, and hopes are still achievable, and your struggles are surmountable. However, it is up to you to pursue and overcome them, despite your challenges and difficulties, so I pray that you will become inspired and motivated to take ownership of your destiny, and I hope that, after you have interacted with the information provided in this work, you will become empowered and equipped to be successful in your academic endeavors.

I also dedicate this work to my grandsons. There is a need for young students to be equipped with certain abilities if they are going to survive and thrive in the new global culture that has emerged from advancements in innovations and technologies. Therefore, it is essential that you develop the ability to be self-directed in your learning, to problem-solve, and to think critically if you are going to matriculate into the new culture,

successfully. Although you are young, I hope that this work provide you with some strategies that you can begin to implement into your learning approaches now. I pray that you appreciate and respect your right to learn and that you grow fond of learning as I have. This work is a mandate for you to fly as far, as high, and as long as God has purposed for you.

Finally, I dedicate this work to administrators, legislators, researchers, practitioners, and interest groups seeking to improve online doctoral education or seeking to influence financial aid policy as well as academic employers, employers, policymakers, and FPCU administrators. I pray that my work has helped your understanding of the experiences of African American students who choose to finish their degrees through online doctoral psychology programs offered by FPCUs. I hope that after you have interacted with my work, you will have gained a clearer understanding of the factors that contributed to a group of these students' successful transition into their roles as independent researchers. I especially pray that you will have gained an in-depth understanding of the meaning of academic achievement for these doctorate recipients. Because stakeholders know relatively nothing of what this population goes through in order to achieve success in a field that has historically been dominated by non-African Americans at institutions plagued with high student attrition rates, I hope that the information provided in my work has added to the current knowledge. I designed this work to make a meaningful contribution in order to incite positive social change for African American psychologists who earned their degrees through FPCUs and for FPCUs offering online doctoral psychology programs.

Acknowledgments

I want to acknowledge those who have been a source of encouragement, empowerment, insight, inspiration, love, strength, and support for me throughout my journey. I thank God for entrusting this endeavor to someone like me. Thank You for providing the vision that has guided this assignment, and I sincerely pray that I have accomplished what You intended through this work. Thank You for Your grace, which carried and kept me throughout this endeavor. Without such an endowment of Your grace, being the rock that provided the foundation of my experiences, I am certain that I would not have made it through. Thank You for being a present help, refuge, and strength in times of difficulty (Psalm 46:1, KJV). Thank You for being my Jehovah Nissi (Exodus 17:15; Isaiah 59:14, 19), my Jehovah Shalom (Ephesians 2:14-17; Colossians 1:20, KJV), my Jehovah Roi (Genesis 16:7-14; Hebrew 4:13, KJV), and my Jehovah Shabbaoth (Zechariah 4:6-10) as well as being Elohim (Genesis 1:1, 26; Deuteronomy 4:35; Matthew 19:26; Hebrew 1:3; James 1:17, KJV), El Shaddai (Genesis 17:1; 28:1-4; Psalm 91:1, KJV), and El Elyon (Genesis. 14-23; Psalm 83:18; Daniel 5:18, KJV)!

I also thank Drs. Faith, Forbearance, Good, Joy, Kind, Love, and Peace. Thank you for the contributions you made to this endeavor. Thank you for trusting me with your story. Thank you for allowing me to share your experiences with those interested in them. I pray that I have represented your experiences well. Through your stories, I gained more commitment, confidence, courage, and strength. Indeed, you were my examples and my role models. I especially pray that God bless and prosper you.

In addition, I thank my parents, my husband, and my Bishop. I thank you for being you! Thank you for your affirmations, encouragement, and prayers. They were the supports that sustained my being. The insight and wisdom you offered throughout the course of my life were mainstays in my journey through this endeavor. Dad, thank you for faithfully reminding me that "God did not bring me this far to leave me" when I experienced devastation. Mom, thank you for faithfully reminding me that "God's grace is sufficient for me," and "He perfects His strength in me when I am weak" (2 Corinthians 12:9, KJV). Babe and Bishop, thank you for faithfully reminding me that, "I *can* do *all* things *through* Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13) when I experienced uncertainty.

I also thank my children and my remaining family members. Thank you for being yourselves. You were my motivation to push through many difficulties that I encountered along the way. Your concern, encouragement, humor, and prayers were the wind beneath my wings. Thank you for demanding my best. Children, you reminding me of the teachings I instilled in you as you made your journeys through childhood and adolescence as well as in your transitions into adulthood was meaningful. This provoked me to push through many hurdles and obstacles to my success. You have made me proud and have made my journey worthwhile.

Last, but certainly not least, I thank Bernie and Rita Turner and Harold "Bud" Hodgkinson. Thank you for your leap of faith and vision. These made it possible for me to actualize my own potential and to make my own contribution to positive social change. I thank the Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Board, former president Bill

Clinton and the Board of Trustees, Cynthia G. Baum, the current president of Walden University, the Library, and the Writing Center staff at Walden. Your contributions and support to Walden made it possible to actualize the vision of Walden's founders. I especially thank Dr. Baron, Dr. Hakim, and Dr. Wilson for allowing me to use your shoulders as my springboard into the discipline. I also thank Drs. J. Carroll, K. Cox, J. Hall, M. Gasman, L. Paule, K. Rynearson, A. Sickel, J. Tanguma, K. Wong, V. Worthington, and D. Yells for your care, challenge, concern, feedback, insight, patience, reprimand, support, and wisdom.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The issues surrounding the disproportionate rate of student loan defaults experienced by Black students are not clear. However, unless the views of online programs are changed, the number of student loan defaulters among Black online, doctoral psychology graduates who attain their doctorate at Title IV private for-profit colleges and universities will increase. These institutions, known as FPCUs, have

> a written agreement with the [U.S.] Secretary of Education that allows the institution to participate in any of the Title IV federal student financial assistance programs (other than the State Student Incentive Grant [SSIG] and the National Early Intervention Scholarship and Partnership [NEISP] programs). (Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013, p. B-3)

They are profit-seeking institutions that are "controlled by privately elected or appointed officials and derives [their] major source of funds from private sources" (Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013, p. B-1). The majority of students attending FPCUs use Stafford loans to pay for their education (Hall, 2010). For these reasons, the ideology of FPCUs being degree mills that produce and that sell degrees has emerged (Hall, 2010).

FPCUs joined the postsecondary education community in 2007 to meet the needs of individuals needing advanced credentials. They offered complete degree programs online (Allen, Seaman, & Sloan, 2008). They originally tailored their programs for working adults. The arrangement of their online programs removed the time and space constraints that usually accompany traditional learning approaches.

Providing degree programs online allowed working adults to study at their own pace because they can access the learning materials from the comfort of their homes (Allen et al., 2008; Columbaro, 2009; Hall, 2010). Many Black adults prefer to enroll at FPCUs because learning online minimizes threats of discrimination and racism (Hall, 2010). Because an Internet-based course management system (CMS) facilitates learning asynchronously, FPCUs should be more favorable for adult learning (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Allen et al., 2008). Compared to traditional colleges and universities (TCUs), FPCUs' higher student attrition (Di Pierro, 2012) and lower graduation rates (Lynch, Engle, & Cruz, 2010) continue to characterize these institutions.

This study is necessary because in the United States, the arrangement and organization of online education indicated important trends in postsecondary education between 2010 and 2013 for all institutions that participate in federal student aid programs. Between July 1, 2011 and June 30, 2012, compared to the 27% representation of public institutions and the 25% representation of private, nonprofit institutions, FPCUs represented 48% of the Title IV institutions in the United States, respectively (Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013). Contrasting the 2% decrease in private nonprofit institutions and the 3% decrease in public institutions between 1991 and 2011, FPUCs increased some 95% (Aud et al., 2013, p. 143).

Consistent with this time, the amount of student loan requests increased 2.5% reflective of this growth in postsecondary education and tuition increases (Aud et al., 2013, p. 136). Consequently, by Fall 2012, student loan debt was nearly $1 trillion (Aud et al., 2013, p. 138), making it the leading type of consumer debt. The U.S. government

delivered $146 billion to assist students who needed federal financial aid in the form of grants and loans. By October 2012, the total outstanding amount of student loans owing was over $500 billion (Aud et al., 2013, pp. 136-137; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013).

These trends emerged when African American adults' college enrollment increased and when 53% of FPCUs had open admission policies. These policies allow the institution to waive many traditional college admission requirements such as standardized test scores (Aud et al., 2013, pp. 136-137). At the time of the 2010 census, 2.9 million African American citizens 25-years-old and older enrolled into college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Between 2010 and 2013, an additional 800,000 African American citizens within this age group had enrolled into college (Census Bureau, 2012, 2014). These increases in African American college enrollment, FPCUs growth, student loan requests, and student loan defaults coincide with the 53% of FPCUs in the United States enrolling students regardless of their academic backgrounds or academic qualifications (Census Bureau, 2012, 2014; Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013).

This general trend coincides with enrollment in graduate psychology programs. In Fall 2011, there were 45,608 students enrolled in graduate psychology programs at doctorate-granting institutions in the United States (National Science Foundation [NSF], 2012). Although students were pursuing degrees in psychology, the majority enrolled in graduate psychology courses. Nearly all of these graduate students were enrolled in programs that were not classifiable within the psychology discipline (NSF, 2012). According to Aud et al. (2013), 52% of these students were enrolled at private

institutions, including FPCUs. Black graduate students interested in psychology are more likely to enroll in doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs, which have minimal or no admission requirements, and they are more likely to use Stafford loans to pay for their education (Hall, 2010).

The current study is relevant because economists projected that between the Fall 2011 and Fall 2021, Title IV institutions' enrollments will include an additional 3.5 million new and returning students (Aud et al., 2013). This 10-year projection represents a growth rate of an additional 60,000 adults enrolling in Title IV institutions per year, respectively. In Fall 2011, Black graduate students accounted for 36% of the 3,835,862 students enrolled in graduate degree programs at Title IV institutions (Aud et al., 2013; Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013). This percentage, combined with predicted growth, suggests that the numbers of Black adults enrolling in online doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs will also increase. The percentage of Black online, doctoral psychology students using student loans is also likely to increase. Because Black borrowers, when compared to other borrowers, experience a disproportionately higher rate of student loan defaults, it is very likely that the number of Black borrowers defaulting on their student loans will also increase.

Black adults desiring a doctorate prefer FPCUs because of their nontraditional approach to graduate school admission (Hall, 2010). This study is necessary because whereas one-half of them will not complete their programs, although they will have amassed a large amount of student loan debt, Black graduates of online doctoral programs are at risk for postdoctorate job discrimination (Columbaro, 2009). Black

FPCU graduates experience student loan default more frequently than Black TCU graduates do, despite having attained doctorates (Hall, 2010), which is another reason why this study is necessary.

Allegations regarding the insufficiency of online doctoral programs at FPCUs exacerbate the problem of student loan default for Black students who completed doctorates in psychology through online programs. Most academic administrators did not believe faculty appreciated the significance and validity of online doctoral/research (Allen et al., 2008, p. 16). One-third of the provosts in Allen and Seaman's (2010) poll also viewed "learning outcomes for online education as inferior to face-to-face instruction" (p. 10). Many academic employers believed that online faculty mentorship at FPCUs is insufficient (Columbaro, 2009).

How FPCU doctoral faculty members view the legitimacy and value of online doctoral psychology education and research is unknown. How FPCUs' provosts view learning outcomes for online doctoral psychology programs at their intuitions is also unknown. However, when people who entertain these types of bias are in positions to mentor, to oversee academic programs, and to make hiring decisions, it is likely that these influence the quality of their mentoring, the quality of their programs, and their hiring decisions (Allen et al., 2008; Allen & Seaman, 2010; Columbaro, 2009; Lovitts, 2008; Lynch et al., 2010). Consequently, their biases adversely affect postdoctorate employment outcomes for Black online, doctoral psychology students who finish their degrees at FPCUs by placing them at risk for student loan defaults (Columbaro, 2009). Collectively, these indicate that there is a need for social change. The need for social

change becomes apparent when the needs of societal members are no longer or are not being met because of breakdowns or because of particular practices in major societal systems.

It is necessary to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs so that federal administrators will know how to address the disproportionate rate of student loan defaults experienced by this population. In focusing the research on the experiences of on a group of these graduates, federal administrators will become of aware of the experiences of Black doctorate recipients who attained their doctorates at FPCUs. The results provide some insight regarding the practices of FPCUs and the effectiveness of their programs.

Another potential social consequence of this study is that FPCU administrators will become aware of the needs of Black online, doctoral psychology students. They will know both how these students are experiencing completing their programs, and what factors aid their success. Having this information, they will be able to decide what actions they should take, when they should take action, and where they should implement these actions. These stakeholders will be accountable to make necessary changes in particular policies and practices.

I divided the remainder of this chapter into several sections, beginning with the background of the problem. Afterwards, I provide the problem statement, the purpose, and the research questions. Then, I discuss the conceptual framework, nature of the study, and definitions. In the remaining sections, I cover the assumptions, the scope and

delimitations, including limitations, and the significance of the study. I conclude the chapter with a summary of the main points.

Background of the Problem

Researchers have conducted many studies of online learning in general. Columbaro (2009) concluded that academic employers were inclined to believe that the mentoring in doctoral programs at FPCUs is insufficient. Columbaro also implied that the academic employers tended to infer that FPCUs produce incompetent doctorate recipients who are unfit for employment. Similarly, Hall (2010) concluded that African American students amass large amounts student loan debt for a fair opportunity for doctoral education. Hall also emphasized that even if the graduates had demonstrated persistence, had experienced less racism, and had high expectations, the career opportunities for FPCU graduates are bleak. There has been much research to address the disproportionate rate of student attrition experienced in online learning environments, and several studies have examined indicators of student attrition and persistence in online programs (e.g., Lee & Choi, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009; Willging & Johnson, 2004). The findings have been inconclusive, and much of research focused mostly on traditional students enrolled in online graduate courses at TCUs.

The research has not been focused exclusively on the experiences of Black students who complete doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs. The current study addresses the gap in the knowledge of Black online, doctoral psychology graduates' academic achievement as it pertains to the effectiveness FPCUs' online doctoral programs. Even though tuition is higher at FPCUs, Black adults use FPCUs as alternative

sources to pursue a doctorate because FPCUs have been effective in removing many barriers to their enrollment in doctoral programs (Hall, 2010). Among the general population of online doctoral students, Black students continue to experience a higher rate of student attrition and student loan defaults (Hall, 2010). Borrowers are classified as having defaulted on student loans when they fail to make payments within 270 consecutive days after they have entered repayment status. The student loan default rate was 9.1% in 2010, reflecting an increase of 4.6% since 2005 (Aud et al., 2013); but, it is not clear why the student loan default rate is 60% for Black borrowers (Hall, 2010).

It is plausible that the student loan repayment policies and the practices of some FPCUs may have created a breach in the U.S. education system. From available research and statistics, the breach is affecting Black online doctoral psychology graduates the most (Hall, 2010; Lynch et al., 2010). Although the nature of the breach is unclear, the current study is necessary because many Black adults are turning to FPCUs with the hope of enhancing their social capital. Research findings suggested that these adults will not gain in social capital (Columbaro, 2009; Hall, 2010). Knowing more about the academic achievement of these doctorate recipients, FPCU administrators, policymakers, and practitioners will have a better understanding of the nature of the breach. They will also be able to make informed decisions regarding financial aid repayment policies, and regarding improvements to online doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs.

Statement of the Research Problem

The problem addressed in this study is the gap in literature pertaining to the experiences of Black students who complete doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs.

The prevailing view of academic employers is that the mentorship in doctoral programs at FPCUs is insufficient, producing incompetent doctorate recipients who are unfit for employment (Columbaro, 2009). Columbaro (2009) and Hall (2010) concluded that the career opportunities for Black FPCU graduates are bleak. However, it is unclear how FPCUs' arrangement and organization are helping or hurting Black online, doctoral psychology students.

It is less clear how FPCU faculty members are mentoring these students. There is a need to know more about the experiences of Black students who complete doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs. Even if the questions regarding the effectiveness of online doctoral psychology programs are legitimate, the problem is that there are many gaps in the knowledge. Researchers know relatively nothing about how these students successfully complete an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU and what factors contribute to their finishing their degrees at FPCUs.

Purpose of the Study

The objective of this phenomenological study was to add to the current literature by applying a naturalistic-interpretative paradigm to understand the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU. I intended to describe the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate in psychology at an FPCU.

Research Questions

The research questions were an outgrowth of previous research findings. I developed them from other researchers' recommendations for future research.

Central Research Question

What is the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who finished an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU?

Subquestions

1. What is the lived experience of Black students who completed an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU?
2. What are the factors that contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees at an FPCU?

Theoretical Foundation and Conceptual Framework

Theoretical Foundation

I grounded this study using self-directed learning (SDL) theory as a strategy to accomplish its purpose. The theory is an extension of adult learning theory. It has its origins in humanistic philosophy and social constructivism. In 1975, Knowles pioneered SDL to portray a student-directed process. Knowles posited that adults, employing this process, do the following:

- initiate learning regardless of having help from others,
- determine learning needs,
- develop learning goals,
- locate learning material and resources,
- select and execute suitable learning approaches, and
- assess learning outcomes (see Chapter 2 for a more detailed explanation of these propositions).

Although generally 60% of Black graduate students do not complete the dissertation process (Hunn-Merriweather, 2008), SDL theory infers enormous belief in the student by differentiating education from learning and focusing on adults' ability to direct their own learning projects (Boyer, Edmondson, Artis, & Fleming, 2014; Garrison, 1997; Edmondson, Boyer, & Artis, 2012). Foundational views of SDL imply that learning transcends classrooms (Houle, 1980; Knowles, 1975; Tough, 1979). These views support FPCUs' program structures.

The structure of FPCUs, unlike the structure of TCUs, places more responsibility for learning on the students while the nature of online doctoral programs gives students more control over their learning projects. This suggests that they have to be more self-directed. Because researchers have emphasized that self-direction is essential for successful academic performance and achievement (Bhat, Rajashekar, & Kamath, 2007) and for online learning efficiency (Lai, 2011), issues might involve students' abilities to engage in SDL projects from a distance.

The relationship between SDL theory and the approach and research questions I used centered on earlier researchers' the tendency to address SDL from a collaborative constructivist standpoint. From this perspective, the individual is at the center of learning, taking responsibility for constructing meaning while collaborating with others to confirm useful knowledge (Garrison, 1997). The significance and value illuminate the "cognitive" and "social" (Garrison, 1997, para 4) sides of the study participants' learning experience. Therefore, meaning and knowledge are individually and collectively constructed (Garrison, 1997). Blending cognitive and collaborative learning processes allowed me to

describe the payoff of learning as "personally meaningful and socially worthwhile" (Garrison, 1997, para 4).

To improve outcomes for current and prospective Black FPCU psychology doctorate recipients, it is important to gain an in-depth understanding of their definite actions within the context of the FPCUs and to gain an in-depth understanding of what factors contribute to their persistence. SDL theory was useful because it illuminated patterns and processes in study participants' learning projects, including projects in which they did and did not have prior content-specific knowledge (Shinkareva & Benson, 2007). The theory was also useful for informing their personal self-directing attributes, including how they pursued and viewed their learning projects. It was beneficial for reporting environmental determinants of SDL, including environments that were more favorable for SDL.

Even if Francis and Flanigan (2012) questioned whether incorporating SDL models within higher education was effective, they as well as Chou and Liu (2005) recognized that the curricula in doctoral education and in online learning environments comprise many features of SDL. This links the importance of SDL to success factors within these environments. Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), Grow (1991b), and Long (1989) discussed incongruence between learning environments and a learner's characteristics in the context of learners' affective responses, particularly negative emotions. The procedures higher education institutions employ to maintain uniformity within their programs may be adversely influencing congruency between the students' learning abilities and the institutions' learning models (e.g., Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991;

Dynan, Cate, & Rhee, 2008; Francis & Flanigan, 2012; Grow, 1991b). They believed that variations in students' self-directing abilities and pedagogical approaches lend to misalignment.

Psychological variables had direct effects on the degree in which online graduate students, in general, persisted and demonstrated self-directedness, but social and demographic variables had indirect effects in previous research findings (Hart, 2012; Müller, 2008; Park & Choi, 2009; Shinkarvera & Benson, 2007; Willging & Johnson, 2004). Similar to the dissertation capstone phase, through the SDL theoretical lens, study participants will have exerted a large amount of originality in determining the what and the how of their dissertation capstone research studies, despite their incoming capabilities and background contingencies (Garrison, 1997). Collectively, the empirical findings and the theoretical discussion indicated that investigators should also consider the context, instructional techniques, and cultural and individual differences when considering SDL.

Conversely, much of the discussion has been limited to the sociological, pedagogical, and psychological dimensions. It has ignored the cultural dimensions involved in SDL. Considering culture was important to this study. Investigators make learning neutral when their investigations of ethnic minority students and these students' learning preclude culture. Within such an investigation, they view learning in terms of mainstream dominant values, making it necessary to interrupt these patterns and to reexamine educational objectives, practices, and standards (Belzer & Ross-Gordon, 2011; Cercone, 2008; Merriam, 2001).

Much of the data indicated that Black doctorate recipients who finished online doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs are among those most affected by the current views of online degrees as well as affected the most by the insufficient mentoring provided by their FPCUs. It was necessary to consider the implication of study participants' race relative to (a) the accessibility of learning, (b) the value of the instruction, (c) the feeling of not being welcomed, and (d) the capability to persist, which SDL theory fails to address (see Belzer & Ross-Gordon, 2011; Cercone, 2008; Hall, 2010; Merriam, 2001). My research questions expanded the theory and filled this gap. The inherent epistemological aspects within the paradigm allowed me to get as close as possible to group of individuals within this population (Creswell, 2013). I collected subjective evidence based on study participants' interpretations regarding their experience of completing their online doctoral psychology programs at their FPCUs. I gained knowledge from the subjective experiences of this population. I used SDL theory to describe academic achievement for Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs.

Conceptual Framework

I also grounded this study using perspectives of culture. Theoretically, *culture* refers to the ways and forms of thinking, believing, acting, and the other things passed down from one generation to the next (Santrock, 2009, p. 580). Culture develops over time from students' interfaces with other people and with their environments (Chiu & Chow, 2010; Dimitrov, 2006; Miller, Das, & Chakravarthy, 2011). Within doctoral education, there is a disproportionate representation of Black doctors of philosophy in

psychology departments (NCES, 2013; NSF, 2012). However, departments, disciplines, institutional practices, mentors, systemic practices, parents, and other important people in an individual's life can convey culture. People manufacture culture from their quest for significance and material goods (Demerath, 2002). They generally make their worlds subjectively meaningful by articulating, typifying, and orienting their experiences (Demerath, 2002, p. 208).

From this stance, culture is epistemological (Demerath, 2002). All knowledge portrays the methodical idiosyncratic basis individuals use to make sense of their realities (Demerath, 1993). Individuals use any knowledge conveyed about their ethnic or racial group and any knowledge conveyed from their ethnic or racial group as a means for which to view the world. They also use the world as a means for which to view their knowledge (Adler, 1930; Allport, 1954; Demerath, 1993; Durkheim, 1915, 1965; Festinger, 1957). Demerath (1993) postulated that it is changes in knowledge, and not changes in percepts that underpin an individual's response to phenomena. Chapter 2 contains a more detailed analysis of this framework.

Within this framework, I viewed human experience as an interaction of Black FPCU doctorate recipients' knowledge and affective responses. Knowledge-based affect illuminates "a visceral-level, bipolar affective response to what the perception of an object does to one's knowledge about that object to one's certainty and ability to predict things regarding that object" (Demerath, 1993, p. 136). Used as such, knowledge informs the creation or formation of people's attitudes, feelings, ideas, opinions, thoughts, and views (Demerath, 1993). Aesthetic experience stems from knowledge-based affect.

Positive and negative responses emerge as in people feeling "that an object is good or bad, beautiful or ugly [or] pleasant or unpleasant" (Demerath, 1993, p. 136). Cultural values reinforce the characteristics, effects, and principles individuals qualifies as important (Chiu & Chow, 2010). The regularity, consistency, and power a people's experiences determine the significance of their experience (Demerath, 1993). Chapter 2 contains a more thorough explanation of these connections.

This framework related to my approach and key research questions in several ways. Because the framework supports a curricular focus, it aligned with the arrangement and organization of doctoral education and online programs. Unlike in the past, today, globalization exposes individuals to a global community in which they encounter people from not only diverse cultures, but who are also directed by cultural roles in which their behaviors have been shaped by their experiences (Dimitrov, 2006; Miller et al., 2011). It is crucial to understand the culturally-specific, personal factors and the university-related factors that contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students' ability to attain a doctorate in a student-directed learning environment and in a discipline that non-Black individuals historically have permeated. The epistemological nature of the framework provided a means for the participants to share their beliefs about relevant information and phenomena. Applying this framework, I framed the interview questions, so I could capture information-rich data.

The constructivist nature of the paradigm recognizes that when seeking to understand the world in which they live and work, people cultivate meanings of their experiences (Creswell, 2013). They focus the meanings toward particular objects or

things. Because the meanings are diverse and multifarious, I searched for the complexity of perspectives opposed to constricting the meanings to a small number of categories or ideas (Creswell, 2013). From this position, I relied primarily on the perspectives of the participants, regarding their experience of completing an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU. I discussed the subjective meanings historically and socially (Creswell, 2013). In addition, I formed the subjective meanings through interactions with the participants. This allowed me to construct meanings socially based on the historical, cultural norms operating in the participants' lives (Creswell, 2013).

I cultivated a pattern of meaning inductively. In carrying out the research and during the interviews, I asked general open-ended questions that allowed the participants to conceptualize the meaning of their experience of completing an online doctoral psychology program at their FPCUs. I listened carefully to what they were saying and for what they were doing, during the experience. I gave attention to the processes of interaction among the participants. I specifically focused on the context of the FPCUs, so that the historical and cultural background of the participants could be understood (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Positioning myself in the research, I acknowledged how the interpretation runs from my own personal, cultural, and historical experiences (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). While making sense of the meanings study participants had about completing their online doctoral psychology programs at their FPCUs, I made an interpretation of the findings based on my own background and my own experiences.

Nature of the Study

My rationale for selecting a phenomenological design is because the issues surrounding the disproportionate student loan default rate among Black FPCU doctorate recipients, from the literature and the results of other studies, are not clear. A quantitative design lacked the features necessary to capture the crucial information necessary to address to this problem. Although the questions regarding the sufficiency of mentoring at FPCUs are legitimate, no researchers have focused exclusively on Black psychology doctorate recipients' experiences at FPCUs. There is a need to know more about how they successfully complete an online doctoral psychology program at FPCUs and what factors contribute to their finishing their degrees at an FPCU.

Phenomenological designs focus on individuals' experience of a specific phenomenon. The phenomenon of Black FPCU doctorate recipients' academic achievement was the central phenomenon of interest. At this stage in the research, Black FPCU doctorate recipients' academic achievement referred to their successful completion of an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU.

I collected data from 60-90-minute in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven Black doctorate recipients who completed doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs. From the interviews, I collected and transcribed phenomenological data about the participants' experiences. To analyze the data, I adopted Moustakas' (1994) modification of van Kaam and Giorgi's empirical phenomenological data analysis steps. The application of a phenomenological design in an exploration of Black FPCU doctorate recipients' academic achievement helps academic employers, employers, policymakers,

and administrators of FPCUs understand how Black FPCU doctorate recipients experience the transition to the role of the independent researcher. It also helps them to understand what factors contribute to their finishing their degrees at an FPCU. In line with Husserl and van Kaam, in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions maintained by minds and objects within the experience, it was necessary for the doctorate recipients to return to the experience by bringing the phenomena, as they appeared, through consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 3.

Definitions

Academic achievement: The use of conventional and unconventional techniques to realize the successful completion of the dissertation process, resulting in a Black online doctoral psychology student earning a conferred doctor of philosophy in psychology degree; it is equivalent to persistence.

African American: Descendants of African denizens whom European Americans annexed, brought to America, forced into slavery, and conditioned to be submissive to them (Hunter & Schmidt, 2010, p. 211).

Black: A term that researchers use when they demarcate cultural groups based on the groups' physical appearance (Hunter & Schmidt, 2010).

Ethnic minority: "A classification of people whose power and wealth were far less than that of the ethnic majority or of White Americans" (O'Brien, Mars, & Eccleston, 2011, p. 406).

Online doctoral program: Doctoral programs that institutions carry out "asynchronously" whereas students completed "more than 80% of the program online,"

and they were required to attend periodic face-to-face colloquia or residencies (Allen et al., 2008; Hall, 2010, p.125).

Open admission: A practice of any institution that allows students to enroll into the institution, without requiring that some criteria, such as ACT, GRE, or SAT, is met (Aud et al., 2013, pp. 142-145). In the current study, open admission described any institutional practice that allowed adults to enter any program of their choice, despite their educational backgrounds or qualifications while minimal or no qualification was required for admission into the institution.

Title IV, private for-profit online institution: Any online profit-seeking business that (a) marketed online education, (b) practiced open admission, and (c) had Title IV status (FPCU; Aud et al., 2013; Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013).

Assumptions

I assumed that online doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs are legitimate and valuable and that faculty mentorship in online doctoral education is sufficient. I targeted Black doctorate recipients who attained their degrees through online doctoral psychology programs offered by FPCUs, so I assumed that participants whom I selected met the inclusion criteria. Because the purpose of the study was to describe the essence of the lived experiences of academic achievement for these doctorate recipients, I assumed that they had experienced the phenomenon under study. I also assumed that they discussed their experiences honestly and openly.

In addition, I assumed that no researchers have explored the phenomenon under investigation, and I assumed that no researcher has focused on the factors that contribute

to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees. I assumed that the research questions and the framework were adequate for collecting data appropriate for the nature and the scope of this study, and for fulfilling its purpose. I assumed that the framework was applicable to the experiences of individuals included in this study. These assumptions were necessary because I used in-depth interviewing as my primary form of data collection.

Scope and Delimitations

Researchers attributed the increases in Black college degree recipients to the drive to recruit Black students into the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) disciplines (Flowers, White, Raynor, & Bhattacharya, 2012; CGS, 2012a; Hall, 2010; NSF, 2012; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2011). I designed the study to address the gap in the literature on the effectiveness of online doctoral psychology programs that pertains to the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs. I chose this focus because the data indicated that between 2010 and 2013, an additional 800,000 African American citizens 25-years-old and older enrolled into college (Census Bureau, 2012, 2014). The data indicated that 1.5 million African American citizens had an advanced degree in 2010 (Census Bureau, 2012), and based on other statistical data, it is likely that many enrolled in doctoral programs at FPCUs, if they returned to school (Aud et al., 2013; Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013).

An estimated 50% of students attending FPCUs do not complete their programs while an estimated 60% of Black doctoral candidates do not complete the dissertation capstone phase (Di Pierro, 2012; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008; Lynch et al., 2010). These

percentages indicate that Black doctorate production is not equitable. When compared to African American representation in the general U.S. population (13.1%), Black doctorate recipients' representation was only 3.6%, respectively, in 2013 (Census Bureau, 2012, 2014).

The population of Black doctorate recipients included in this study was those who attained a conferred doctorate in psychology from an FPCU within the past 5 years. Other populations of Black doctorate recipients who finished their degrees at other institutions and in other disciplines did not have experience with the phenomenon under study, so I excluded them. Black doctoral students enter online learning environments with cultural experiences and cultural heritages that are unique to ethnic minority U.S. citizens, such as experiences of discrimination, oppression, and racism within the U.S. education system and the workplace (Gasman, Hirschfeld, & Vultaggio, 2008; Hall, 2010; Henfield, Owens, & Witherspoon, 2010; Rochon, 1997).

Because of academic employers' claims of insufficient mentoring for online doctoral students and claims of incompetent FPCU doctorate recipients, there is a need to know more about how Black doctoral psychology candidates experience the dissertation phase at FPCUs and what factors contribute to their finishing their degrees. Despite the serious nature of said claims and the plausible adverse ramifications of them, particularly concerning the potential negative effect they could have on postdoctorate employment opportunities, and thus, the student loan default rate among this population, the literature provided no data that refuted or substantiated these claims. From this observation, I believed critical race, feminist, and queer theories and postpositivist and transformative

frameworks related to the current area of study. However, I did not investigate these theories and frameworks.

I primarily chose the current framework because it allowed me to address the issue from the strength of Black online, doctoral psychology graduates. It also allowed me to illuminate the practices of FPCUs. Using the framework permitted me to acknowledge that historical cultural events may shape individuals' behaviors, allowing me to incorporate historical cultural events. Appropriate study participants were individuals who had (a) participated in an online doctoral psychology program in which they completed more than 80% of the program online, (b) completed an approved dissertation capstone, and (c) met all requirements necessary for earning a conferred doctorate in psychology at an FPCU within the past 5 years.

The transferability of the study is limited because I used a unique-criterion-purposive sample. I excluded individuals who (a) were not African American, (b) had not completed an online doctoral psychology program, (c) attained their doctorate from an institution other than an FPCU, and (d) met inclusion requirements, but attained their doctorate more than 5 years ago. These exclusions were necessary because different themes may have emerged from the data, and the individuals might not have viewed their experience the same because of the passage of time.

Limitations

There were some limitations of the study. The study was limited because I employed a qualitative design that focused on subjective data I collected from a unique-criterion-purposive sample of seven Black FPCU doctorate recipients. Qualitative designs

commonly begin with assumptions and use an interpretive theoretical framework to structure the study of a human or social problem (Creswell, 2013). This limited the design to the meaning the participants ascribed to the problem (Creswell, 2013).

The results might not be generalizable to other doctorate recipients. Following the phenomenological approach posed a weakness for the study because I used a small sample of Black doctorate recipients who finished online doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs. Transferability and dependability of the results are limited to the lived experiences of individuals within this population.

Because of the unique cultural experiences of African Americans and the unique structure and nature of doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs, the study results are context bound. This limits generalizability to the sample I selected. The success phenomenon also limited the study by excluding interviews with Black online, doctoral psychology students who did not complete their programs. Consequently, I used reasonable measures to address limitations.

One measure I used was my selection of a diverse sample relative to the participants' ages and program completion dates. Selecting graduates of various FPCUs was another measure I used. Additional measures I used were selecting participants from various cities within the United States and selecting participants from various specializations within the psychology discipline.

Some limitations to trustworthiness arose from the execution of the study. The study was limited to seven individuals who completed their doctorates at two FPCUs. Most participants were female. The participants' specialties were limited to clinical

psychology, educational psychology, general psychology, and industrial and organization psychology, and most participants had attained their doctorates in industrial and organizational psychology. This excluded other specialty areas. In addition, I had significant control over the data analysis and the research design, so my perceptions inherently influenced the study.

I adopted a constructivist approach to carry out the study. This approach stresses the importance of my reflexivity. It emphasizes that I identify and understand biases and assumptions that may have influenced my decisions and interpretations (Creswell, 2013).

I identify as an African American doctoral psychology candidate at an FPCU who has several years of negative and positive experiences as an online student. In addition, I have nearly two decades of experience as a founder of a Christian-based, nonprofit organization where I obtained and managed both federal grants and state contracts to provide services to marginalized groups, and special populations within these groups. This background and experience informed my biases and perceptions and most likely shaped my approach to the study as well as shaped my interpretation of the data.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because all doctorate recipients are indicators of increased investments in human resources governments allocate to engineering, research, scholarship, and science (NSF, 2012). Consequently, all governments monitor the number of doctorate recipients for they provide measures of a nation's fitness to create awareness and progress in numerous domains (NSF, 2012). According to NSF, over time, changes in the U.S. administration, economy, and population as well as societal changes

and high-technology advancements translate into changes in the characteristics of doctorate recipients. At the time of current study, some of these changes included a change in the time it takes to complete doctoral study, an increased representation of ethnic minority doctorate recipients, and a reduction in postdoctorate employment opportunities (NSF, 2012). To know what improvements are necessary in the U.S. doctoral education system, U.S. government officials needed to understand how these are connected (NSF, 2012).

Black adults enrolled in online doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs amass a large amount of student loan debt for a fair opportunity to attain doctoral education (Hall, 2010). In addition to having large amounts of student loan debt on their credit reports, the attitudes, beliefs, and concerns of some employers regarding the competence and the employability of FPCU doctorate recipients place unemployed Black FPCU doctorate recipients at risk for student loan default. At the time of the current study, linking student loan default to a gamut of problems for individuals who default on their student loans, President Obama had begun conversations with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Jack Lew, and community leaders. The conversations were focusing on student loan repayment policy reform (Rev. J. Jackson, personal communication, June 21, 2014).

This phenomenological study was focused on successful academic achievement at FPCUs. It adds to the current available knowledge regarding the rigor of the dissertation phase of doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs. This topic has not received sufficient attention in the literature. It is necessary to gain an in-depth understanding of the

experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs and the factors that contribute to their success in order to change the fate of current and prospective Black FPCU doctorate recipients.

FPCUs have a responsibility to act in ways that are indicative of social accountability and responsibility. They have a duty to ensure that their practices align with good stewardship of the student loan funds that U.S. officials have entrusted to them. Findings of this study have the potential to change current views of FPCU doctorate recipients, to provide information that could aid reforms in student loan repayment policies, and to contribute to advancements in FPCU practices.

The results of this study provide crucial information regarding the effectiveness of doctoral psychology programs offered by FPCUs. I applied a naturalistic-interpretative paradigm to create an in-depth understanding of the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate in psychology through an FPCU. I used a phenomenological design to explore the effectiveness of FPCUs' doctoral psychology programs in order to help academic employers, employers, policymakers, and FPCU administrators understand how Black FPCU doctorate recipients experience the transition to the role of the independent researcher, and what factors contribute to these students finishing their degrees at an FPCU.

The findings have several implications for social change. In focusing the research on the experiences of individuals in this population, I was able to make recommendations that, based on the words of Black doctors of philosophy who have both book knowledge and first-hand experience with the phenomenon, could help FPCU administrators

maximize the effectiveness of their programs. Advancements in FPCU practices and reforms in student loan repayment policies might change the fate of current and of prospective Black FPCU doctorate recipients. The results also assist in locating insufficiencies in online doctoral psychology programs that, if improved, will save Black online, doctoral psychology students both time and money.

Another potential effect of the study that could lead to social change is that the appreciation for the value and the worth of online doctoral education could increase. More important, the postdoctorate employment discrimination against FPCU doctorate recipients could stop, which could make it possible to reduce the number of Black doctorate recipients who default on their student loans. This study adds to the current available knowledge of the effectiveness of online doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs. The findings offer subjective evidence for administrators and researchers interested in understanding academic achievement for this population, and researchers interested in understanding the factors that contribute to these students finishing their degrees. Having an in-depth understanding of how these students experience success and what factors contribute to their success will help researchers separate variables and design more effective models for FPCUs' online doctoral psychology programs.

Summary

I focused on student loan debt, particularly the problem of Black student loan default. This study is necessary because in the United States, the arrangement and organization of online education indicated important trends in postsecondary education between 2010 and 2013 for all institutions that participate in federal student aid

programs. Black borrowers experience a significantly higher rate of student loan defaults than other students do (Hall, 2010); yet, the issues surrounding this phenomenon are not clear. Black adults desiring a doctorate prefer FPCUs because of their nontraditional approach to graduate school admission (Hall, 2010).

This study is necessary because whereas one-half of them will not complete their programs, although they will have amassed a large amount of student loan debt, researchers suggested that Black graduates of online doctoral programs are at risk for postdoctorate job discrimination, despite having attained their doctorate (Columbaro, 2009; Hall, 2010). This suggests that unless more is known about their experiences in these programs, the number of student loan defaulters within this population is likely to increase. Conversely, in spite of documented claims that FPCUs' doctoral programs are ineffective, providing insufficient mentoring of online doctoral students, producing incompetent doctorate recipients, and thus exploiting students and student loan funds, this topic has not received sufficient attention in the literature. Researchers did not focus exclusively on the experiences of Black students who complete online doctoral psychology programs offered by FPCUs.

The current study addresses the gap in the knowledge of the effectiveness FPCUs' online doctoral programs that pertains to Black online, doctoral psychology graduates' academic achievement. It addresses the gap in literature pertaining to the experiences of Black students who complete doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs. The question of how Black doctorate recipients finish an online doctoral psychology program at any FPCU that has minimal or no admission requirements and that allows adults to enter any

program of their choice is unanswered. Although FPCUs' arrangement and organization appear to reduce many barriers for Black adults, there is a need to know more about the academic achievement of the population of adults who finished their degrees through online doctoral psychology programs offered by FPCUs.

The objective of this phenomenological study was to add to the current literature by applying a naturalistic-interpretative paradigm to understand the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU. It was intended to describe the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate in psychology at an FPCU, which was the phenomenon under study. The research questions were an outgrowth of previous research findings and suggestions for future research: they centered on the experiences of Black doctoral psychology graduates of FPCUs and the factors contributing to their finishing an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU.

I grounded this study using SDL theory as a theoretical foundation and culture as a contextual lens perspectives as a framework for fulfilling the study's purpose. The framework was useful for understanding the experiences of Black doctoral psychology graduates of FPCUs, and the factors contributing to their finishing an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU. I primarily chose the current framework because it allowed me to address the issue from the strength of Black online, doctoral psychology graduates and to illuminate pertain practices of FPCUs. The transferability of the study is limited because I used a unique-criterion-purposive sample of Black individuals who attained a conferred doctorate in psychology at an FPCU within the past 5 years.

This study is significant because all doctorate recipients are indicators of increased investments in human resources governments allocate to engineering, research, scholarship, and science (NSF, 2012). The findings of this study have the potential to change current views of FPCU doctorate recipients, to provide information that could aid reforms in student loan repayment policies, and to contribute to advancements in FPCU practices. The results of this study provide crucial information regarding the effectiveness of doctoral psychology programs offered by FPCUs. I was able to make recommendations that, based on the words of Black doctors of philosophy who have both book knowledge and first-hand experience with the phenomenon, could help FPCU administrators maximize the effectiveness of their programs. I provide a review and synthesis of relevant literature in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Many Black adults are turning to FPCUs, hoping to enhance their social capital. Researchers have implied that these adults will not gain in social capital, and they are at more risk for defaulting on their student loans, despite having attained doctorates (Columbaro, 2009; Hall, 2010). Even if the questions regarding the effectiveness of online doctoral psychology programs are legitimate, the problem is that there are many gaps in the knowledge. It is necessary to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs, so that federal administrators will know how to address the disproportionate rate of student loan defaults experienced by this population.

Research on the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU and the factors that contribute to their success is nonexistent, presenting several gaps in the knowledge that pertains to the effectiveness of online doctoral education. The objective of this phenomenological study was to explore how Black students in online doctoral psychology programs experience the dissertation capstone process. I specifically examined how a group of these students who finished their degrees at Title IV FPCUs and what factors contributed to their success. The study was designed to create an in-depth understanding of the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate in psychology at an FPCU.

I divided the remainder of this chapter into three major sections, discussing (a) the literature search strategy, (b) the theoretical and conceptual literature, and (c) the current literature. In the first section, I discuss the strategy used to obtain information. Then, I provide an examination of the validity of the framework and the framework's validity for ethnic minority students, including key statements and definitions, applications, and benefits of the framework. In the third section, I offer a review of relevant peer-reviewed literature and empirical research that has focused on key constructs and concepts. I explore the effects of these on Black students' academic achievement. I also discuss how all these relate to the current study and the research questions. I end the chapter with a summary and conclusions.

Literature Search Strategy

I accessed Walden University online library's EBSCOhost online research databases and Internet search engines to obtain information. I searched abstracts of relevant articles, dissertations, and conference papers published between 2008 and 2014 using the terms: *achievement*, *African American students*, *culture*, *online learning*, and *self-directed learning*. I conducted separate searches in databases commonly used in the adult education discipline, such as Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, and Education: Sage Journals, ERIC, and ProQuest: Dissertations and Theses databases, and PsycARTICLES database. Narrowing the searches, I combined the terms with the Boolean operators, such as *African Americans* AND *academic achievement* and *African Americans* AND *online learning* AND *doctoral education*.

I used Walden Library's default dates, and I combined the terms more generally with the Boolean operators, such as *online learning* OR *web-based learning* OR *distance education* AND *ethnic minority students* AND *academic achievement* OR *persistence* OR *success* when the searches resulted in few results. I also used Internet search engines, such as Google Scholar, to obtain information. In addition, when a cited source provided an additional empirical study or crucial information on the topic, I obtained information from the original study. Most of the articles were located in Walden University's online library.

Self-Directed Learning Theory

In 1975, Knowles pioneered SDL to portray a student-directed process. Knowles posited that when employing this process, adults initiate learning regardless of having help from others, determine learning needs, develop learning goals, locate learning material and resources, select and execute suitable learning approaches, and assess learning outcomes. The theory is an extension of adult learning theory that emerged from Knowles' (1975) postulation that as individuals mature psychologically, they move from the need for others to direct them, and they move from the need to depend on others. In the theory, Knowles posited that adults, by adapting a self-concept of independence, develop the psychological need to direct themselves because they have a self-concept of self-sufficiency and sovereignty that stems from an extensive background in life experiences. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) added that adults have a need to understand the relevancy of what they are learning. They also noted that because adults' motivation to learn derives from a personal need to learn, they have a proclivity towards

solving problems, and they are naturally motivated to learn. Most adult education researchers cite Knowles' definition of SDL.

SDL theory has its origins in humanistic philosophy and social constructivism. Humanistic philosophy emphasizes the autonomy and the freedom of human beings (Elias & Merriam, 1980). This philosophy cites, "human beings are capable of making significant personal choices within the constraints imposed by heredity, personal history, and environment" (Elias & Merriam, 1980, p. 118). Among the humanistic assumptions are (a) the possibility for individuals to develop and grow is boundless, (b) the conception that individuals have of themselves is fundamental to human development and growth, (c) human beings innately have a proclivity toward self-actualization, and (d) individuals determine their own reality (Elias & Merriam, 1980). However, much of the research of SDL has been focused on developing models (e.g., Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Garrison, 1997). The studies that I found involved mostly White undergraduate or White graduate students attending TCUs (e.g., Caffarella, 1982; Francis & Flanigan, 2012; Torrance & Mourad, 1978).

I found only a few studies of SDL that have included Black participants. These studies included a disproportionate small number of Black adults who were attaining a general education diploma (GED; e.g., Baghi, 1979). They have also involved Black adults who were completing on-the-job-training (e.g., Spear & Mocker, 1984). Because of the different skillsets necessary for attaining a GED and for completing on-the-job-training, the themes may not be the same for Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU.

Oher researchers have only involved samples of students in online courses (e.g., Chou & Liu, 2005), students in work-related online training programs (e.g. Chu et al., 2012; Lai, 2011), and graduate students who were continuing their education in various disciplines, such as adult education, law, and nursing (e.g., Kasworm, 1983; Oddi, 1984). Some researchers have also used SDL as a variable for students' academic performance and online learning effectiveness (e.g., Shinkarvera & Benson, 2007). These studies mostly involved questionnaire methods, structured interview methods, and survey methods.

Few researchers have used an SDL theoretical framework in phenomenological studies. Chou (2013) applied an SDL framework in a phenomenological study that examined the "phenomenon of successful online learning" (p. 115), which he "defined as a higher academic performance (A or 90)" (p. 115). For the study, Chou included a convenience sample of six graduate students who were taking different graduate courses in the adult education field at a U.S. public university. The students' professors had distinguished them as high achievers. Chou sought to find evidence that confirmed the role of SDL in online graduate courses.

From the interviews, Chou (2013) found that while the participants viewed successful online learning as fulfilling course expectations or as acquiring knowledge, they did not relate successful learning to their final course grade. Chou concluded that the high achieving online graduate students, in this sample, were also highly self-directed learners. They were motivated to accomplish their learning tasks in the face of heavy coursework loads, and they demonstrated active patterns in their online courses.

Clark (2013) also used the SDL framework in a phenomenological study that focused on problem-solving for nontraditional adult online students taking online courses at a rural community college. Clark included mostly older White students who were new to online learning. Clark and Chou (2013) only included students enrolled in online courses offered by one traditional college and university (TCU).

These studies, combined with earlier research studies, indicated that the literature on SDL theory is incomplete. It does not include the experiences of Black online, doctoral students who finished their degrees at FPCUs. Taking online courses offered by a TCU and completing an online doctoral psychology programs offered by FPCUs are not the same. Because of the nature of doctoral education, the unique structure of FPCUs' programs, and the unique cultural heritage of African Americans, the themes may not be the same for Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU.

I chose to use SDL theory as a theoretical foundation for several reasons. Adult education researchers have applied the SDL theoretical framework to diagnose adults' learning problems and to understand adult learning behaviors. SDL is vital for survival and longevity in the 21st century; it forms the basis for success in learning, in academia, and in the workplace (Chou & Chen, 2008; Francis & Flanigan, 2012). Guglielmino (1977) found that self-directed learners are distinguished from other learners because of their "openness to learning opportunities," "self-concept as an effective learner," "initiative and independence in learning," "informed acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning," "love of learning," "creativity," "future orientation," and "ability to

use basic study skills and problem-solving skills" (pp. 57-69). Agreeing with Guglielmino, Long (1989) emphasized the "role of learner characteristics within the SDL process" (p. 3); both maintained that such learner characteristics informed learners' engagement or lack thereof within the SDL process and within the learning their learning environment.

Psychological variables had direct effects on the degree in which online graduate students, in general, persisted and demonstrated self-directedness, but social and demographic variables had indirect effects in previous research findings (Hart, 2012; Müller, 2008; Park & Choi, 2009; Shinkarvera & Benson, 2007; Willging & Johnson, 2004). However, qualitative studies that model the SDL framework are scarce. No researcher has applied an SDL framework to understand the phenomenon of Black FPCU doctorate recipients' academic achievement, particularly how cultural factors shape the SDL experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU.

There are several relationships between SDL theory and the current study. SDL theory infers enormous belief in the student. It differentiates education from learning and focusing on adults' ability to oversee their learning projects (Boyer et al., 2014; Garrison, 1997; Edmondson et al., 2012). Similar to the dissertation capstone phase, through the SDL lens, the graduates will have exerted a large amount of originality in determining the what and how of their dissertation capstone research projects, despite their incoming capabilities and background contingencies (Garrison, 1997). The contributions of earlier researchers made it possible to view self-direction as "a role adopted during the process

of learning or as a psychological state attained by an individual in personal development. Both factors can be viewed as developed abilities and, hence, analyzed both as to how they are learned and how they affect SDL efforts" (Fellenz, 1985, p. 164). The theory provided a context for the current study to understand the its participants' learning behavior as an interaction that involves intellectual, behavioral, personological, and environmental influences (Cavaliere, 1988; Guglielmino, 1977; Knowles, 1975; Oddi, 1984; Sabbaghian, 1979; Spear & Mocker, 1984).

Prior to the current study, it was not clear exactly how Black online, doctoral psychology students experience SDL, and it was less clear exactly how they develop the capacity for SDL and capitalize on the SDL processes, particularly in the context of successfully completing their online doctoral psychology program at their FPCUs. The research had not been focused on this student population. Researchers had not considered the influence of culturally specific, personal factors that contribute to these students' academic achievement. With these deficiencies, the ability of SDL theory to provide a complete composite of how Black online, doctoral psychology students successfully finished their degrees at their FPCUs was limited. However, applying a naturalistic-interpretative paradigm, my research questions expanded the theory and filled this gap.

Culture

The concept of culture is broad. Theoretically, culture refers to the ways and forms of thinking, believing, and acting as well as the other things each generation passes down to the next (Santrock, 2009, p. 580). Through culture production, individuals make their worlds subjectively meaningful by articulating, typifying, and orienting their

experiences (Demerath, 2002), supporting my data collection method. Departments, disciplines, institutional practices, mentors, systemic practices, parents, and other important an individual's life can convey culture because culture develops over time from students' interfaces with other people and with their environment (Chiu & Chow, 2010; Dimitrov, 2006; Miller, Das, & Chakravarthy, 2011). Individuals manufacture culture in their quest for significance and material goods (Demerath, 2002). Culture is epistemological (Demerath, 2002). Knowledge portrays the methodical idiosyncratic basis in which individuals make sense of their realities (Demerath, 1993).

Students can use knowledge as conveyed about and as conveyed from their ethnic or racial group as a means from which to view the world (Adler, 1930; Allport, 1954; Demerath, 1993; Durkheim, 1915, 1965; Festinger, 1957). They also can use the world as a means from which to view their knowledge (Adler, 1930; Allport, 1954; Demerath, 1993; Durkheim, 1915, 1965; Festinger, 1957). Knowledge-based affect illuminates "a visceral-level, bipolar affective response to what the perception of an object [ethnic or racial group or self] does to one's knowledge about that object to one's certainty and ability to predict things regarding that object" (Demerath, 1993, p. 136).

Used as such, knowledge informs the creation or formation of a student's attitudes, feelings, ideas, opinions thoughts, and views (Demerath, 1993). Moreover, cultural values orient members of a given culture to the culture (Chiu & Chow, 2010). They reinforce the characteristics, effects, and principles that a student qualifies as important (Chiu & Chow, 2010). These essentials have the capacity to influence students'

dogmas, priorities, motives, and eventually their behaviors and their realities (Chiu & Chow, 2010; Demerath, 2002).

Although individuals manufacture culture from their quest for significance and material goods, a culture's values endorse what happens in a society. A culture's values dictate what is significant in a society (Demerath, 2002). They are also channels for beliefs, and they are frameworks for people's attitudes and needs. Needs are only as representative of an individual's values because the person's desire is unfulfilled (Demerath, 2002; Dimitrov, 2006).

Conversely, not all attitudes are derivatives of the original culture's values. Attitudes can encompass partialities, positive or negative stereotypes, and or prejudices that are held by a culture or that are held by a student (Baysu, Phalet, & Brown, 2011; Cokley, 2002; Elion, Wang, Slaney, & French, 2012; Hall, 2010; O'Brien et al., 2011). Feeling that an object is good or bad or feeling that an object is ugly, pleasant, or unpleasant is a function of a person's appraisal bias and personal control, including the person's inner appeal for social illustrations and reliable perceptions (Adler, 1930; Allport, 1954; Demerath, 1993; Durkheim, 1915, 1965; Festinger, 1957).

Demerath (1993) noted that the aesthetic experience stems from knowledge-based affect. This suggests that positive and negative responses emerge as in a person's feeling that something is negative or positive, or acceptable or unacceptable. Discrimination, for example, is a forceful arrangement of marginalization of people who are characteristically different, and racism involves a group of conscious or unconscious racially acclimatized dogmas, opinions, or standards that directly or indirectly result in

the mistreatment of Black individuals (Hall, 2010, p. 60). However, while students' motives may drive their efforts, the society in which they live could accept or reject the effort students exert en route to achieving their goal (Dimitrov, 2006; Houle, 1961).

Ego-relevant affect describes a student's adjustment to modifications in her or his self-perception (Demerath, 1993, p. 136). Associative affect, similar to classical conditioning, is the result of either earlier instances of knowledge-based affect or a student's adjustment to modifications in her or his self-perception (Demerath, 1993, p. 137). Consequently, either of these sources of affect could emerge as evaluations that can underwrite the construction of semantic meanings, and these meanings will stabilize over time (Demerath, 2002).

In ego-relevant affect, increases or decreases in a student's locus of control or social status will have caused positive or negative emotions (Robinson, 2001; Rochon, 1997). Some experiences in educational settings, such as the absence of culturally relevant material, teacher partiality, and continuous negative and offensive societal messages about a student's ethnic group, engender a persistent consciousness of diabolical stereotypes related to a student's ethnic or racial group (Cokley, 2002; Hunter & Schmidt, 2010). These experiences are known as an encounter. An encounter is a racially motivated experience that causes a Black student to realize the significance of being an African American (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006, p. 3).

Because knowledge represents the systematic eccentric basis in which individuals make sense of their realities (Demerath, 1993, p. 136), the very nature of the encounter, as experienced in academic settings, presents an immediate threat to the self (Cokley,

2002; Seitchik, Jamieson, & Harkins, 2014). This judicious understanding marks a phenomenon called stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is "a process in which African American students fears that their behavior (e.g., lower academic performance) will confirm the stereotypes associated with their group" (Cokley, 2002, p. 379).

The regularity, consistency, and power of one's experiences determine the significance of the experiences (Demerath, 1993). In associative affect, similar to classical conditioning, any situation that causes Black students to question their ability produces negative affect (see Cokley, 2002). This happens because of associations with previous experiences of stereotype threat. It is plausible that Black online, doctoral psychology students may inadvertently perceive the experiences of continuous criticism and failure that accompany the dissertation process as threats to the self because individuals make their worlds subjectively meaningful by typifying their experience (Demerath, 2002).

Festinger (1957) postulated that it is changes in the percept underpin a person's response to phenomena. In contrast, Demerath (1993) posited that it is changes in knowledge and not changes in the percept that underpins a person's response to phenomena. However, it was unclear how Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs experience such a paradigm shift, supporting the importance of having dialogues with these individuals.

How students define, identify, and understand themselves is vitally important. Theoretically, identity refers to "who a person is, representing a synthesis and integration of self-understanding" (Santrock, 2009, p. 398). A person's commitment to an identity

will depend on “the degree to which that identity organizes and clarifies one’s experience of the world and him/herself” (Demerath, 1993, p. 491). Self-understanding is an individual’s “cognitive representation of the self, the substance of self-conceptions” (Santrock, 2009, p. 398), and self refers “to all the characteristics of a person” (Santrock, 2009, p. 398).

Students’ personalities form the basis for how they will engage in learning and how they understand as well as how they interact with others during the learning experience. Personality refers to the “enduring personal characteristics of students [, and it] is usually viewed as the broadest of the three domains and as encompassing both self and identity” (Santrock, 2009, p. 398). Guglielmino (1977) found that self-directed learners are distinguished from other learners because of their “openness to learning opportunities,” “self-concept as an effective learner,” “initiative and independence in learning,” “informed acceptance of responsibility for one’s own learning,” “love of learning,” “creativity,” “future orientation,” and “ability to use basic study skills and problem-solving skills” (pp. 57-69). Agreeing with Guglielmino, Long (1989) emphasized the “role of learner characteristics within the SDL process” (p. 3); both researchers maintained that such learner characteristics informed learners’ engagement or lack thereof within the SDL process and within the learning their learning environment.

Empirical findings have indicated that the degree to which graduate students were able to conduct SDL and to self-direct depended largely on their self-concept (see Guglielmino, 1977; Rutland, 1987; Sabbaghian, 1979). A student’s self-concept refers to “domain-specific evaluations of the self” (e.g., academic self-concept; Santrock, 2009, p.

405). A student's self-esteem and self-image refer to "global evaluations of the self" (Santrock, 2009, p. 405). Therefore, it is plausible that the conclusions Black online, doctoral psychology students made regarding themselves, prior to entering doctoral programs at FPCUs, came into these programs with them. This conclusion regarding self possibly followed them throughout their experiences in their online doctoral psychology programs at their FPCUs.

Researchers have applied the concept of culture in several ways. Several investigators have applied a culturally based contextual lens with an inherent epistemological nature to understand learning behaviors, learning experiences, and learning outcomes for ethnic minority students (e.g., Diemer & Li, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2011; Pizzolato, 2006; Rochon, 1997). Previous research of the influence of culturally specific factors in Black students' academic achievement has focused on the relationships between academic disidentification and academic underachievement (e.g., Cokley, 2002). Earlier researchers have also examined the relationships between perfectionism, racial identity, GPA, depression, and self-esteem (Elion et al., 2012).

Phenomenological researchers have explored the phenomenon of social capital and its significance in the educational and occupational attainment of formerly "at risk" African American adult male achievers (e.g., Kelly, 2012). Kelly (2012) did not focus on attaining a doctorate in psychology at an FPCU. Hunn-Merriweather (2008) applied grounded theory methods to test Guiffrida's cultural advancement of Tinto's model of doctoral student departure in an examination of the factors that aided Black graduate students' persistence at a predominantly white institution (PWI), but Hunn-Merriweather

focused on doctoral students in the adult education discipline. The literature is incomplete because it has excluded the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU.

Empirical studies describing the culturally specific, personal factors and the university-related factors that contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees at an FPCU were nonexistent. Mallett, Mello, Wagner, Worrell, Burrow, & Andretta (2011) investigated correlations between feelings of belonging in school and the educational expectations of ethnic minority students. Other researchers have examined factors affecting underrepresented student populations' graduation rates, persistence, retention, and success (e.g., Creighton, 2007; Crisp & Nora, 2010; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2011). Richardson (2010) examined the differences between study approaches ethnic majority and ethnic minority students use. The research provided valuable insights into the salience of students' ethnic and racial backgrounds in the students' educational experiences, but the findings have been inconclusive. Clearly, no researcher has exactly explored how cultural factors influence Black online, doctoral psychology students' SDL, nor has any study focused on what specific culturally specific, personal factors and university-related factors contribute to their finishing their degrees at an FPCU.

Researchers have articulated culture in several ways: the ideas, the values, and the assumptions about life that guide people's behavior (Santrock, 2009). Within this literature, the definition of culture varied between the education, management, organizational behavior, psychology, sociology, and social psychology disciplines

(Dimitrov, 2006). Some researchers portrayed culture as a type of communal indoctrination of the mind (Dimitrov, 2006); others described culture as a complex whole that encompasses things such as behaviors, beliefs, competencies, customs, and knowledge, gained by male members in a society (Dimitrov, 2006). Several researchers referred to culture as a set of clearly understood behavior patterns that human groups gained and passed along, through symbols of their unique achievements (Dimitrov, 2006). Conversely, existing studies of cultural influences in Black students' academic achievement have been primarily quantitative, and much of the research has consisted of various samples of undergraduate students at TCUs, such as historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) or PWIs.

This framework was beneficial to the current study in several ways. It provided a means for understanding study participants' human experience as the interaction of self, cultural factors, knowledge, and affective responses (Cokley, 2002; Demerath, 1993, 2002; Elion et al., 2012; French et al., 2006; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008; Kelly, 2012; Maeder & Wiener, 2010; Rochon, 1997; Santrock, 2009). It also allowed me to address issues from a strength-base that empowered Black doctorate recipients to share their stories of finishing their Ph.Ds. in a student-directed learning environment, in a discipline that non-Black individuals historically has permeated, and through an institution among the institutions characterized by high student attrition rates, which were absent in this body of literature. Using this framework afforded me many important opportunities to understand what Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs experience. As they articulated their experience, using this framework, I gained

some insight regarding what specific culturally specific, personal factors and university-related factors contributed their finishing their degrees at their FPCUs, and thus filling some gaps in the knowledge and the discipline.

In summary, this section provided a sketch of how SDL theory provides higher education researchers, policymakers, and practitioners a theoretical lens to view academic achievement for Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees through an FPCU. It also discussed how cultural perspectives offer a contextual lens for which to determine the influence of cultural and educational background on the experiences of these doctorate recipients. In addition, the section discussed the application of these perspectives to the current study. A review of relevant studies follows.

African Americans in Higher Education

The body of literature addressing Black college students from a strength-base has increased (e.g., Cokley, 2002; Elion et al., 2012; Kelly, 2012; Rochon, 1997). However, student achievement, student attrition, student persistence, and student success phenomena are compounded and multifaceted. Researchers, within the literature, used the terms achievement, persistence, retention, and success interchangeably to characterize a student's continuous participation in a certificate or a degree program or a course until the student attained a certificate or a degree, or the student completed the course (Hart, 2012; Lee & Choi, 2011; Müller, 2008). Student achievement, student attrition, student persistence, and student success phenomena are difficult to explain and to understand because they involve human behavior that changes with time.

Researchers in the discipline have addressed the complexities of student attrition, student persistence, and student success phenomena in various ways. Hall (2010) explored the phenomenon of Black adults' enrollments at FPCUs. Hall used a sample of 12 Black PreABD (Black students in the doctoral coursework phase of their programs) and all-but-dissertation (ABD; students who were in the dissertation capstone phase of their programs) students and graduates of various doctoral programs in various disciplines, at a various FPCUs (e.g., Argosy University, University of Phoenix, and Walden University). Hall focused narrowly on race. Hall did not consider the participants' program of study. Hall also did not consider the graduates' actual experience of completing the dissertation process.

Henfield et al. (2010) also conducted a phenomenological study. They focused on the phenomenon of being a Black doctoral student who was pursuing their doctorates in counselor education doctoral program at one PWI. The ages of individuals in the sample were comparable to those of Black online, doctoral psychology students. However, the researchers did not focus on completing the dissertation capstone. Their use of participants' self-reported grades as a measure of success is a cause to question what success actually meant for their participants.

Similarly, Museus and Ravello (2010) conducted a phenomenological study that focused on the phenomenon of academic advising. They focused on the aspects of academic advising that promoted success for ethnic minority students attending "GEMS" (p. 49). GEMS are distinguished PWIs, having high and equitable success rates for "generating ethnic minority success" (p. 49). They also recognized that their study did

not explicate how ethnic minority students' ethnic- or racial-identity influenced their experiences (p. 56). They did not consider the students' program of study, and the sample included a disproportionately higher number of Latino students.

Although several qualitative investigators have explored factors contributing to academic success for Black or ethnic minority graduate and doctoral students, clearly, no study has focused on the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs. No researcher has considered the factors that contribute to these students finishing their degrees at their FPCUs. The majority of researchers used purposive samples of Black doctoral students in the adult education, counselor education disciplines at TCUs, or they focused on Black doctors of education who attained their doctorate at TCUs (e.g., Gasman et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2010; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008; Museus & Ravello, 2010). Conversely, this strategy has further marginalized Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs.

Online administrators, policymakers, and practitioners need to know more about what researchers have learned regarding student persistence. Having this knowledge, they will be able to make informed decisions improvements to enhance FPCUs' online doctoral psychology programs. Because student persistence is one measure of outcomes, online administrators, policymakers, and practitioners will also be able to improve learning outcomes for Black online doctoral psychology students. Evaluating the academic achievement of Black students in the context of their successful completion of an online doctoral psychology program through an FPCU assists these efforts. In the next

section, I review and synthesize the literature related to African Americans' college enrollment, experiences, achievement, and success factors.

Enrollment

The number of Black adults enrolling in college has increased. Responding to the growing population of Black college students and the rising attrition rates among them, investigations of Black students' academic achievement are becoming more widespread in the literature. Much of the research in the literature on this phenomenon has been quantitative or statistical. Although most ethnic minority students and older students used community colleges as a starting point for higher education (Clark, 2013; Crisp & Nora, 2010), only a few qualitative studies have related enrollment factors to Black students' academic achievement.

Data indicated that President Obama's appeal for increases in college enrollments received a noteworthy response from African American citizens. At the time of the 2010 census, 2.9 million African American citizens 25-years-old and older enrolled into college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In 2013, of African American U.S. citizens within this age group, 8.3% enrolled in college (Census Bureau, 2014). This percentage reflects an increase of 800,000 African American college enrollees from 2010 (Census Bureau, 2012, 2014).

Theoretically, adults view themselves as autonomous and independent (Clark, 2013; Knowles, 1975; Knowles et al., 2005), but the longer they delay entering postsecondary education after graduating high school adversely influence their chances of pursuing a doctoral education and their chances of earning a Ph.D. credential (Crisp &

Nora, 2010). Because of affirmative action rules within civil rights legislation, the principle goal for institutions of higher is to create a diverse student body. Administrators at these institutions use various strategies to determine which applicants to accept, to decline, or to place on a waiting list in order to comply with affirmative action rules and to create a diverse student population.

In satisfying affirmative action rules, institutions use actuarial models, clinical approaches, or mathematically based plans. Clinical approaches incorporated admissions counselors' experience with rejecting and selecting applicants and performance theories (Maeder & Wiener, 2010). Actuarial models and mathematically based plans were more mechanized because they comprise empirically preselected, performance-based predictive factors derived from performance research (Maeder & Wiener, 2010). The actuarial models and mathematically based plans used for admitting students undermined the essentiality of college applicants' self-determination (Hall, 2010; Maeder & Wiener, 2010).

Researchers have uncovered several culturally based barriers inherent within the admission processes of traditional graduate schools. Among these were the graduate record examinations (GRE), point systems, and other measures of academic achievement and success (e.g., GPA; Maeder & Wiener, 2010). The literature also cited several barriers and obstacles to admission into traditional graduate and doctoral programs for Black applicants. Finances, gatekeeper courses, GRE scores, convoluted and drawn-out application processes, and past academic performance were more frequently in the literature (Hall, 2010; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008; Ward & Wolff-Wendel, 2011).

Researchers have not reached consensus on the effectiveness or the validity of these measures. When compared to White graduate school applicants, Black graduate school applicants' past academic performance, GPAs, and GRE scores are lower (Francis & Flanigan, 2012; Hall, 2010; Maeder & Wiener, 2010; Ward & Wolff-Wendel, 2011). They have continued to debate the significance of the GRE. They have argued that the GRE presents barriers for many Black graduate school applicants who score low on the exams although its ability to predict the probability of students' success is questionable (Hall, 2010; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008).

Hall (2010) emphasized that despite their overall academic success, how the participants grappled with their inability to do well on these exams suggested that they had internalized the messages of color blindness and of meritocracy as equal opportunity. Hall also suggested that because one may not be able to point to blatant racism in standardized exams, it is easier to conclude that failure to do well is simply a consequence of individual deficiency, which was a point made by both O'Brien et al. (2011) and Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2011). Even though some institutions have moved away from requiring the GRE for admission (Hall, 2010), the research findings indicated that racial discrimination continues to be an issue for American Americans, particularly within the context of the doctoral education system at TCUs. Despite the remarkable improvements in intergroup relations since slavery and since the civil rights era, historical, cultural, and structural phenomena, such as those inherent in TCUs' graduate school admission process, are likely to have influenced Black graduate students'

enrollments in doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs (Hall, 2010: Henfield et al., 2010).

Adults, theoretically, have an extensive background in life experiences that accompany them in the learning situation (Clark, 2013; Knowles, 1975; Knowles et al., 2005). Because the phenomenon of online doctoral education is relatively new, most Black online, doctoral psychology students have had experiences with TCUs. Consequently, it was necessary to understand what their experiences may have been as students attending TCUs. I review and synthesize literature regarding African Americans' college experiences in the next section.

Experiences

Empirical studies describing the experiences of Black online doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs and the factors that contribute to their finishing their degrees at FPCUs were nonexistent. The majority of the research has involved Black or ethnic minority students enrolled in high school, community college, and undergraduate programs at TCUs (e.g., Cokley, McClain, Jones, & Johnson, 2011). Flowers, Moore III, and Flowers (2008) and Flowers et al. (2012) focused narrowly on Black students' participation in distance education programs offered by HBCUs and Black students' satisfaction with HBCUs' distance education programs for the STEM fields. Most of the studies involving Black graduate or doctoral students and ethnic minority graduate or doctoral students have focused on academic advising and academic barriers, faculty-student and peer interactions, and mentoring and supports for students

attending HBCUs and PWIs (e.g., Fountaine, 2012; Henfield et al., 2010; Museus & Ravello, 2010).

Concerned about the cultural factors that are involved in the variances in African American college students' and European American college students' achievement, some researchers have suggested that affirmative action seats academically unfit African American college students in academic programs filled with more academically fit Asian American and European American college students (Cokley, 2002). There have been several qualitative investigations of academic integration and social integration for Black students in doctoral programs (e.g., Gasman et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2010; Hunn Merriweather, 2008). These studies only included students in the adult education and counselor education disciplines at ivy league institutions (ILIs) and PWIs. Most Black online doctoral students who finish their degrees at FPCUs attended TCUs as undergraduate or graduate students, or they attended them as both undergraduate and graduate students (Hall, 2010).

Graduate programs aim to ensure that students have the information and the expertise necessary for their professional development, and they "serve the important purpose of socializing students into distinct occupational roles" (Gasman et al., 2008, p. 130). Museus and Ravello (2010) recognized that "college students of color enter institutions of higher education as complex individuals with multiple identities that shape their experiences" (p. 47). The literature emphasized that how faculty socialize graduate students who are in doctoral programs into their occupational roles is significant. Faculty's role in the socialization of Black online, doctoral psychology students is to help

them cultivate the norms and values associated with their roles as professor or as scholar-practitioner (Gasman et al., 2008; Lovitts, 2008). Most Black doctoral students at FPCUs reported that they attended PWIs (Hall, 2010). Because Clark (2013) found that older adults' extensive background in life experiences accompanied them into their online courses offered by their rural community colleges, to appreciate academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients, it was helpful to understand what their experiences might have been before entering their online doctoral psychology programs at their FPCUs.

Across academic contexts and across educational levels, research findings were clear and were consistent. They have indicated that generally students within ethnic minority groups experienced unique phenomena that students within ethnic majority groups do not experience (e.g., Baysu et al., 2011; O'Brien et al., 2011; Mallett et al., 2011; Robinson, 2001). Black graduate students at TCUs continued to report frequent personal experiences of discrimination even though U.S. Congress added the civil rights act into legislation over "50 years ago" (see Civil Rights Act, 1964).

In some findings, the narratives of Black students in doctoral programs in the adult education and counselor education disciplines at ILIs and PWIs revealed that these students continued to experience negative contacts, particularly racial discrimination and prejudice, when they interacted with faculty, peers, and staff at these institutions (e.g., Gasman et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2010; Hunn Merriweather, 2008). Within their narratives, these students indicated that they perceived differences between how faculty treated them, and how faculty treated White students (Hall, 2010; Henfield et al., 2010). Research findings have indicated that environmental cues, such as Black students being

aware of the low number of Black students in a learning setting and students being bombarded with negative stereotypes about African Americans' academic underachievement, endorsed the hypothesis that they did not fit within a particular educational setting (Cokley 2002; Mallett et al., 2011). Although the dissertation calls for some degree of independence, the relationships Black online, doctoral psychology candidates have with their mentors, peers, and staff are important for their success in their programs.

Mallett et al. (2011) indicated that for ethnic minority students, in general, recalling discriminatory experiences or reflecting on their group membership is enough to perpetuate belonging uncertainty. Whereas stereotype threat arises when "African American students fear that their behavior (e.g., lower academic performance) will confirm the stereotypes associated with their group" (Cokley, 2002, p. 379), belonging uncertainty arises during any situation that reiterates a student's lack of social connection (Mallett et al., 2011). When Black college students experienced stereotype threat, particularly Black male students, and when their sense of belonging was threatened, they showed declines in academic motivation and in academic achievement (Cokley, 2002; Mallett et al., 2011). Hall (2010) concluded that Black students in online doctoral programs within various disciplines experienced less racism at FPCUs.

There was no information to determine whether Black online, doctoral psychology graduates experience belonging uncertainty or stereotype threat. More important, there was no information to show how they adjusted if they did confront belonging uncertainty or stereotype threat. It was still plausible that Black online,

doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU and who experienced discrimination within the U.S. education system experience belonging uncertainty. The literature indicated that when Black students did not feel socially connected or did not feel that they belonged within a particular learning situation, they responded in various ways.

Some findings indicated that the students responded to feeling socially disconnected and feeling uncertain about whether they belonged within a particular learning situation in ways that were both favorable and unfavorable for their academic success. Most of the narratives of graduate and doctoral students have emphasized how the students became more assertive and continued to persevere, and how they took advantage of alternatives (Gasman et al., 2008; Hall, 2010; Henfield et al., 2010; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008). Some findings have revealed strong positive relationships between ethnic minority students' feeling socially connected in learning institutions and their academic achievement (e.g., Cokley et al., 2011; Creighton, 2007; Mallett et al., 2011; Museus & Ravello, 2010; Ward & Wolff-Wendel, 2011). Feeling socially connected most likely assisted Black online, doctoral psychology students' influenced experiences at their FPCUs. It also most likely enhanced their ability to finish their degrees, but there was no data to refute or to support this claim.

Mallett et al. (2011) maintained that ethnic minority students' perceptions of their usual feeling of school belonging are likely to be more concise after they have considered discrimination. Researchers have uncovered a variety of challenges and difficulties that Black graduate students in doctoral programs confront on college campuses, such as

inadequate guidance, inadequate socialization, racism, stereotyping, and systemic discrimination (e.g., Gasman et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2010). Hall (2010) found that most of the Black online doctoral students and graduates of doctoral programs at various FPCUs expressed feeling socially connected. However, the one student who was in a doctoral psychology program perceived otherwise (see Hall, 2010). Although this individual was the only student who expressed feeling socially disconnected and was the only student in a doctoral psychology program, there is cause for concern because of the decline and paucity of Black doctorate recipients in the field of psychology.

Hall's (2010) finding suggests that the same learning environment can affect the individual student differently. Incongruence between the instructional setting and the doctoral student's characteristics is possible. Cokley (2002) posited that exchanges between a student's academic self-concept, characteristics, and instructional setting might affect a student's achievement when the instructional setting and the student's characteristics do not match. Previous researchers found that incongruence between learning environments and a learner's characteristics was associated with students' negative affective responses (Grow, 1991b; Long, 1989).

For some ethnic minority student samples, there were relationships between the students' academic achievement and their culture, their self-concept, and their ethnic- or racial-identity (e.g., Cokley, 2002; Elion et al., 2012). The interactions between the students' academic self-concept, learning characteristics, and the learning situation influenced the student's academic achievement when there were incongruence between an instructional setting and a student's characteristics (Cokley, 2002). Therefore, in the

section that follows, I review and synthesize studies related to African Americans' academic achievement.

Academic Achievement

The literature also has cited the reasons for Black doctoral students' academic underachievement at TCUs well. Because of the higher attrition rates and the lower graduation rates among the population of Black online, doctoral psychology students at FPCUs, it was important to explore these phenomena further. Much of the research on African Americans' academic achievement has been quantitative and statistical. It has focused primarily on the low graduation rate for Black graduate students.

Conversely, no researcher has focused on Black online doctoral students' academic achievement, particularly in the context of their experiences of the dissertation phase at FPCUs, although data also indicated that President Obama's appeal for increases in college graduates received a noteworthy response from African American citizens. At the time of the current study, there the number of Black adults attaining college degrees had also increased. The number of African American citizens attaining college degrees also indicated upward trends. From 2010 to 2013, an additional 100,000 African American citizens attained an undergraduate or a graduate degree (Census Bureau, 2012, 2014).

The number of African American citizens attaining a doctorate also indicated upward trends. In 2010, data indicated a marginal representation of Black doctorate recipients in nonscience and engineering fields: physical sciences (3%), engineering and humanities (just over 4%), life sciences (over 5%), social sciences (6%), and education

(over 14%; NSF, 2012). However, the percentage of Black students receiving a conferred doctorate in psychology had decreased (5.9%; NSF, 2012). Between 2000 and 2011, the number of Black doctorate recipients showed a 64% increase, respectively (NCES, 2013; NSF, 2012), and by 2012, Black doctorate recipients accounted for 6.3% of all doctorate recipients (NSF, 2012). Combined, these percentages indicate an 87% increase in Black doctorate recipients over the past 20 years (NCES, 2013).

These data indicated that Black students represented the largest ethnic minority group to attain conferred doctorates in the field of education (NSF, 2012). However, African American doctorate production is not equitable. When compared to African American representation within the U.S. population (13.1%), Black doctorate recipients' representation was only 3.6% in 2013 (Census Bureau, 2012, 2014). The kind of persistence that is necessary during the doctoral coursework phase is not the same as the kind of persistence that is necessary during the dissertation phase of doctoral education (Lovitts, 2008; Hunn Merriweather, 2008).

Empirical findings have indicated that there are associations between academic achievement and various factors and variables, including culture, self-concept, and ethnic- or racial-identity (e.g., Cokley, 2002; Elion et al., 2012). There was evidence that indicated that ethnic minority status affected Black college students' academic achievement, experiences, performance, and persistence as well as Black college students' learning techniques and the quality of what they learned (e.g., Henfield et al., 2010; Kelly, 2012; Richardson, 2010). From these findings, how Black online, doctoral psychology students identified with their ethnic or racial group likely influenced their

academic achievement, experiences, performance, and persistence. It is likely that it also influenced their approaches to the dissertation phase and the quality of their dissertation.

Student persistence through the dissertation phase is problematic among the general population of graduate students (Lovitts, 2008; Hunn Merriweather, 2008). Approximately 15% to 25% of doctoral candidates within the general population of doctoral candidates do not complete the dissertation process (Lovitts, 2008). Thirty-one percent do not do so within 10 years of candidacy (CGS, 2012a), but 60% of all Black doctoral candidates do not complete the dissertation phase (Hunn-Merriweather, 2008). It is important to increase the number of Black doctorate recipients, particularly in the field of psychology. Poor outcomes for Black online, doctoral psychology students at FPCUs have the potential to influence prospective African American adults' enrollment decisions.

The literature has cited the reasons for Black doctoral students' academic underachievement at TCUs well, but this research has not focused on Black online doctoral students' academic underachievement, particularly in the context of their experiences of the dissertation phase at FPCUs. Consequently, researchers know relatively little about the reasons for academic underachievement for Black online, doctoral psychology students at FPCUs, especially during the dissertation phase. This topic warrants special consideration in the research literature because generally Black graduate students in doctoral programs experience a higher rate of attrition (CGS, 2012a, 2012b; Lovitts, 2008; NCES, 2013; NSF, 2012). Although FPCU administrators and educators assume that Black students are capable of enduring the process when they

enroll in online doctoral programs, completing the dissertation process is the most difficult experience a doctoral student will endure (Lovitts, 2008). In the section that follows, I review and synthesize literature pertaining to success factors for African American college students' achievement.

Success Factors for Academic Achievement

The research pertaining to success factors for ethnic minority college students has primarily focused on environmental, institutional, and student factors involved in these students success at TCUs (e.g., Elion et al., 2012; Gasman et al., 2008; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008). A few studies have examined success factors for African American college students in general. Generally, researchers have discovered several factors contributed to Black students' success. Some factors cited in the narratives of Black doctoral students included the availability of financial aid, having family support, and relying on their Christian faith or believing in a spiritual higher power (Gasman et al., 2008; Hall, 2010; Henfield et al., 2010; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008). Another success factor cited was Black students' their parents' educational attainment, and researchers discovered that Black students used their parents' academic success as a point of reference, which provided additional motivation for sustaining their commitment and persistence (Gasman et al., 2008; Hall, 2010).

Fountaine (2012) also found that Black doctoral students profit from the company and the leadership of Black professors. Fountaine also found that not all Black doctoral students profited from the company and the leadership of Black professors. Earlier findings have emphasized the importance of Black doctoral students' relationships,

particularly with faculty (e.g., Columbaro, 2009; Fountaine, 2012; Gasman et al., 2008; Hall, 2010; Henfield et al., 2010; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008; Lovitts, 2008). However, within the literature, there was a considerable amount of confusion surrounding the meaning of the phrase *relationships with faculty* within the literature.

Researchers used several terms, such as advisors, faculty, and mentors in reference to students' relationships with faculty (e.g., Columbaro, 2009; Fountaine, 2012; Gasman et al., 2008; Hall, 2010; Henfield et al., 2010; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008; Lovitts, 2008). The meaning of the roles for people serving in these capacities was unclear. It was important to understand exactly what the terms advisors, faculty, and mentors meant for Black online, doctoral psychology students at FPCUs. These terms have strikingly different meanings in different learning contexts.

Several investigators have recommended that advisors or faculty should have on- and off-campus relationships with students (e.g., Fountaine, 2012; Museus & Ravello, 2010). Other researchers have suggested that faculty should be involving students in research apprenticeships and should be offering students teaching assistant opportunities because these interactions are essential for success (e.g., Gasman et al., 2008). In online doctoral programs, many students lack opportunities for on- and off-campus relationships with faculty, research apprenticeships, and teaching assistant opportunities. Because collectivism is a hallmark of African American culture (Hunter & Schmidt, 2010; Rochon, 1997), it was also important to understand how these students managed to succeed, despite having limited access to these people.

Museus and Ravello (2010) found that several of their participants believed specific aspects of the advisors' interactions were helpful, including humanizing the practice of academic advising, using a multifaceted approach to advising, and delivering proactive academic advising. They concluded that faculty-student interactions could positively influence outcomes for ethnic minority students at PWIs when faculty members are earnestly concerned about students, are able to provide generalized support, and are willing to go beyond their call of duty. Henfield et al. (2010) found that the 12 Black doctoral students who were pursuing their doctorates in counselor education doctoral program at the PWI identified many impediments to human agency. They also found that various forms of support aided the students' persistence, but their use of participants' self-reported grades as a measure of success is a cause to question what success actually meant for their participants because researchers have not reached consensus regarding the validity of grades as a measure of academic success generally for ethnic minority students.

Compared to White college students' grades, Black college students' grades are lower (Cokley, 2002). Black college students also tend to perform poorer than White college students perform on standardized skills and mastery tests (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2011). While the reasons cited for these differences among Black students varied within the literature, cultural factors and environmental factors, such as relating educational success with "acting White" as well as inadequate resources, lower socioeconomic status, prejudice, and racism, were the most prevailing (Cokley, 2002; Kelly, 2012; Whaley & Noël, 2012). Museus and Ravello (2010) advised that "advisors should consider [cultural]

factors when learning about their advisees' backgrounds and determining how to provide holistic and proactive advising" (p. 56).

Cokley (2002) noted that advocates of cultural factors attributed the differences between Black college students' and White college students' grades and test performances to affirmative action. They inferred that affirmative action seats academically unfit African American college students in academic programs where more academically fit Asian American and European American college students outperform them (Cokley, 2002). Hunn-Merriweather (2008) discovered that through their social connections, Black graduates and Black students in a doctoral program at a PWI gained the tacit knowledge they needed to navigate through the program successfully. Hunn-Merriweather also found that Black students who finished their degrees at the PWI developed an intense sense of responsibility to their communities and families, which motivated them to complete their programs.

Safeguarding their self-esteem, combined with reward seeking, would have increased their motivation because performing poorly would have been punishing (Pizzolato, 2006). The narratives of high-Ph.D.-producing faculty at highly selective research-intensive universities indicated that when students were intrinsically motivated, they were more creative (Lovitts, 2008). They also emphasized that when students were intrinsically motivated, they were most likely to complete the dissertation phase with ease (Lovitts, 2008). It was unknown whether motivation to complete their programs for Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs was more extrinsic or intrinsic.

For some samples of Black graduate students in doctoral programs, commitment and faith were other success factors. Black students' commitment to the goal of attaining a degree might be so overwhelming that the desire to attain a degree overpowers any adversary of that goal, including a lack of financial assistance, discrimination, racism, or student loan debt (Hall, 2010). In many of the narratives of Black doctoral students, the students attributed their fortitude to persist to their faith in God. Many participants said that during the times when they felt like they were ready to drop out, they gained strength from their belief that God would help them finish their programs (Gasman et al., 2010). Henfield et al. (2010) referred to this phenomenon as inner determination, but how these students experienced faith to persist and succeed was unclear.

The literature also cited HBCUs as another success factor for Black students. Across all levels of higher education, HBCUs have been a critical source and a leading force for Black college students. Historically, they have accounted for the largest number of African American enrollments (Flowers et al., 2012; Hall, 2010). They produced the largest number of degrees across each level in higher education (Fountaine, 2012; Hall, 2010).

Unlike most Black graduate students in doctoral programs at ILIs and PWIs, most Black graduate students in doctoral programs at HBCUs performed at higher levels (Fountaine, 2012; Hall, 2010). They had better relationships with faculty, peers, and staff (Fountaine, 2012). Fountaine indicated that these relationships promoted feelings of connectedness and reassurance (Fountaine, 2012; Hall, 2010). Even though HBCUs foster engaging and reassuring environments where Black students have a bolstered self-

esteem and have a sense of ethnic pride, empirical findings indicated that not all Black students will (Fountaine, 2012).

Researchers have been able to document Black students' participation in and pleasure with distance education offered by HBCUs, in general, and distance education programs for the STEM fields, in particular (Flowers et al., 2008; Flowers et al., 2012; Fountaine, 2012; Hall, 2010). However, HBCUs follow traditional admissions procedures. Only 2% of U.S. colleges and universities are HBCUs. This suggests that not only will students have to relocate to attend an HBCU, but they also will have to contend with traditional admissions issues. It is apparent that HBCUs have been unresponsive to the needs of Black students. From the literature, HBCUs continued to be reluctant in meeting the growing demands and needs of Black adults, and despite recommendations to expand their distance education programs, their programs were still very limited (Flowers et al., 2012).

From the narratives of Black online doctoral students, seemingly FPCUs have provided a plausible alternative (e.g., Hall, 2010), but no researchers have specifically focused the success of FPCUs. No researchers have considered exploring this phenomenon, particularly in the context of doctoral education. At the time of the current study, ethnic minority adults' responses to the offerings of FPCUs were remarkable (Hall, 2010; Lynch et al., 2010). Because no researcher has focused specifically on Black online, doctoral psychology students' success at FPCUs, the current study filled this gap. It gave these graduates a voice in the literature regarding their experience of successfully completing an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU and the factors that

contribute to their finishing their degrees at an FPCU. In the rest of this chapter, I review and synthesize studies related to the research questions. I, specifically, cover FPCUs and the dissertation.

Title IV Private For-Profit Colleges and Universities

Several researchers have conducted studies to address issues regarding the effectiveness of learning online. They have gained some understanding of the influence of SDL in the outcomes for online students (e.g., Chou & Chen, 2008; Chou & Liu, 2005; Chu et al., 2012; Lai, 2011; Clark, 2013; Shinkarvera & Benson, 2007). Most researchers have focused on student attrition and student persistence (e.g., Hart, 2012; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Lee & Choi, 2011; Müller, 2008). Several researchers have focused on the trends in students reenrolling in online courses (e.g., Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2012; Hall, 2010).

Kupczynski, Gibson, Ice, Richardson, and Challoo (2011) examined the relationship between student activity, which they defined as the students' login frequency and their duration in the learning management system (LMS), and the students' end of course grades. Other investigators assessed the relationships between students' attitudes and their course completion and program completion (e.g., Park & Choi, 2009). This literature is limited. The majority of researchers did not separate data by ethnicity, but the literature is also incomplete because the majority of the researchers have involved students enrolled in online courses at TCUs.

Even though there were only a few FPUCs, such as Capella University, Walden University, and the University of Phoenix and University of the Rockies, offering online

doctoral psychology programs (Hall, 2010; NSF, 2007), Black students comprised 49% of the ethnic minority graduate student population at FPCUs from July 1, 2011 to June 30, 2012 (see Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013). Data have indicated that approximately 50% of these students will not complete their programs (Di Pierro, 2012). Despite these data, researchers have not considered the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs. Researchers know relatively nothing about this population.

Researchers have not considered the factors that contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees. They have not considered the dissertation phase of online doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs, especially Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs experiences of the dissertation phase these FPCUs. Because researchers know relatively nothing about this population, it was necessary to understand the contexts of FPCUs. This helped to ascertain the issues confronting Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs.

The phenomenon of online learning emerged during the late 1990s (Allen et al., 2008). The industry's rapid growth paralleled the rapid development of technology (Lee & Choi, 2011). Contrasting the 2% decrease in private nonprofit institutions and the 3% decrease in public institutions, between 1991 and 2011, FPUCs increased some 95% (Aud et al., 2013, p. 143). Data collected by Ginder and Kelly-Reid (2013) indicated that between July 1, 2011 and June 30, 2012, FPCUs represented 48% of the U.S. institutions that had Title IV status, which suggests that nearly one-half of the Title IV contracts to

receive federal student aid funds in exchange for educating students requiring federal aid went to FPCUs.

FPCUs are similar to other private for-profit businesses. They are in business to generate profits. They are publically traded companies that are in the business of marketing education to consumers of education (Hall, 2010). For these reasons, the ideology of FPCUs being degree mills that produce and that sell degrees has emerged (Hall, 2010).

FPCUs' expansion supported the $483 billion increase in student loan demands (Aud et al., 2013, p. 136). It also coincided with the time that 2.9 million African American citizens 25-years-old and older enrolled into college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Students drop out of FCPUs more often than they drop out TCUs (Di Pierro, 2012), but researchers have not reached consensus on why some students do not fare well in online learning environments while other students thrive in online learning environments. In the following sections, I examine literature pertaining to FPCUs' structure, enrollment, and degree conferment.

Structure

Well-built theoretical perspectives can be informative in pursuits aimed at increasing student persistence and retention, despite the type of higher education institution. FPCUs joined the postsecondary education community in 2007 to meet the needs of individuals needing advanced credentials. They offered complete degree programs online (Allen et al., 2008). They originally tailored their programs for working adults to remove the time and space constraints that accompanied traditional learning

approaches because providing degree programs online allowed these adults to study at their own pace, and they could access the learning materials from the comfort of their homes (Allen et al., 2008).

The structure of FPCUs accommodates a curricular focus that aligns with the nature of SDL, particularly its organization, planning, prearrangement, preparation, and procedure. The structure of FPCUs, unlike the structure of TCUs, places more responsibility for learning on the students. The nature of online doctoral programs gives students more control over their learning projects. The online education offered by FPCUs is different from distance education and traditional education offered by TCUs.

Most FPCUs deliver at least 80% of their programs within an Internet-based course management system (CMS; Allen et al., 2008). There are no face-to-face meetings in online programs. All class discussions take place within the CMS. These arrangements facilitate more opportunities for adult online students to access the FPCU and learning materials without cost, space, and time limitations (Chu et al., 2012).

Theoretically, the structure of online programs should enhance students' ability to access information (Shinkarvera & Benson, 2007). It should improve their acumen (Shinkarvera & Benson, 2007). Online doctoral psychology programs offered by FPCUs meet the needs of Black online, doctoral psychology students by promoting greater autonomy. Because their arrangements facilitate self-direction, they should inspire the students to take responsibility for their own dissertation projects.

Research findings have indicated that within the structure of online programs, adult students can develop higher self-efficacy (Chou & Liu, 2005). Adult students can

also self-monitor their progress relatively easy (Chou & Liu, 2005). They can login to their classes any time of day, every day (Kupczynski et al., 2011). They also have the flexibility of engaging in learning activities whenever they choose (Kupczynski et al., 2011).

From earlier research, the online learning environment should be productive for any adult student (Spear & Mocker, 1984). With the student-centered nature and structure of FPCUs' online programs, doctoral students have more accountability for learning. This suggests that some degree of SDL is necessary for success in FPCUs' online doctoral psychology programs. The arrangement of online programs should enhance SDL for students who are naturally independent learners (Chou & Liu, 2005; Dynan et al., 2008; Shinkarvera & Benson, 2007).

Researchers have noted that it is possible to design online programs to develop students' readiness for self-directed learning (SDLR; Chou & Liu, 2005; Dynan et al., 2008; Shinkarvera & Benson, 2007). Conversely, despite the accommodating structure of FCPUs, high student attrition rates (Di Pierro, 2012) and low student graduation rates (Lynch et al., 2010) continue to plague these institutions. These issues might involve students' abilities to engage in SDL projects from a distance.

Some researchers have concluded that the emotional climate in some learning situations was a significant predictor of online learning effectiveness (Chou & Liu, 2005). The reasons for these phenomena were not clear because of inconsistency regarding which facets of online learning designs were exactly the most effective. Although previous research has empirically established that it is possible to improve SDL skills in

online students (Dynan et al., 2008; Shinkarvera & Benson, 2007), no researcher has specifically addressed the university-related factors that aid Black online, doctoral psychology students in finishing their degrees at FPCUs. Researchers have pointed to the need for more investigations of the role of students' cultural background in effective online learning (Chou, 2013; Chu et al., 2012). The scope and purpose of the current study aligned with this recommendation. The next section explores literature pertaining to FPCUs' enrollment.

Enrollment

Even though Black adults' responses to the offerings of FPCUs have been remarkable (Lynch et al., 2010), Hall (2010) was the only study within this body of literature that focused specifically on Black online, doctoral students at FPCUs. Hall's findings suggested that having knowledge of how they are perceived and are received in a given learning context determined where many Black adults desiring doctorates choose to pursue their education (Hall, 2010). Online learning models have environmental processes that influenced enrollments in postsecondary education (Allen & Sloan, 2010; Lynch et al., 2010). These processes emphasized FPCUs' unique attitude towards admission, enrollment, and retention (Hall, 2010; Hachey et al., 2012; Lee & Choi, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009).

Between 2011 and 2012, 53% of FPCUs had open admission policies. These policies allowed the institution to waive many traditional college admission requirements, such as standardized test scores (Aud et al., 2013, pp. 136-137). By waiving traditional

requirements such as GRE, and SAT, FPCUs enrolled students and allowed them to enter any program, regardless of their academic backgrounds or qualifications (Hall, 2010).

Although findings from Aud et al. (2013) indicated that African American graduate students were most likely to enroll in FPCUs, which have minimal or no admission requirement, Hall (2010) found that some Black preABD and ABD students and graduates of various doctoral programs in various disciplines, at a various FPCUs (e.g., Argosy University, University of Phoenix, and Walden University) reported that TCUs placed them on long waiting lists even though they had passed the GRE. Hall also found that other participants balked at the GRE or postponed enrolling in a doctoral program because of the GRE. From the participants' narratives, evidently the GRE presented a barrier to enrollment, and thus was debilitating to academic achievement for some Black doctorate-seekers. This suggested that having to contend with this standardized exam led the students to question their academic prowess and to question whether they belonged in doctoral education (Hall, 2010).

In contrast, many participants believed that the GRE was a waste of their time (Hall, 2010). Hall noted that these participants preferred spending their time actually pursuing their degrees rather than preparing for an entrance examine. Similarly, other findings have indicated that FPCUs have been effective in eliminating some culturally based barriers, such as low GPA and low GRE scores generally for ethnic minority online students (Maeder & Wiener, 201 0; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2011). Hall concluded that although the flexible admission processes at FPCUs attracted Black doctorate-seekers, and although the FPCUs seemingly minimized the impact of race and racism, Black

online doctoral students incurred large amounts of student loan debt in exchange for a fair opportunity to attain doctoral education.

Conversely, researchers have not reached consensus on the effectiveness of online doctoral programs. Even if FPCUs provide Black doctoral students an alternative for degree attainment, data have indicated that compared to TCUs, student attrition at FPCUs is higher (Hall, 2010; Lee & Choi, 2011; Lynch et al., 2010; Park & Choi, 2009). If FPCUs are manufacturing and selling degrees, then their student attritions rates should be lower. However, it was not clear why their student attrition rates are higher than TCUs' student attrition rates. The next section explores degree conferment for FPCUs.

Degrees Conferred

Student retention is an essential goal of all colleges and universities. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System's (IPEDS) is responsible for tracking demographical data, such as unduplicated student headcounts for Title IV contractors. Museus and Ravello (2010) emphasized, "retention and graduation rates of racial and ethnic minority students continue to be a major concern for higher education researchers, policy makers, and practitioners" (p. 47). Much of the research in this area has been statistical. It has mostly consisted of national surveys (e. g., Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013; NSF, 2012; Lee & Choi, 2011).

These surveys provided valuable statistical data. However, they lost information-rich qualitative data. They did little for understanding the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs. They provided no specific information regarding the factors that contribute to these students' success.

The literature indicated that generally only a few FPCUs offered online doctoral programs in general. Among these FPCUs, Walden University was the only FPCU that ranked among the top universities that produced the most doctoral graduates in 2007 and in 2011 (NSF, 2007; NSF, 2012). However, according to the IPEDS's findings, from July 1, 2011 through June 30, 2012, FPCUs produced 1% of the conferred doctorates (Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013). Because students who drop out of FPCUs were more likely to default on their student loans than are the students who drop out of TCUs (Hall, 2010), at the time of the current study, policymakers were concerned about the rapid acceleration in enrollment at FPCUs (NCES, 2013; NSF, 2012). They raised important questions regarding the value of online education, and they were especially concerned about outcomes for online doctoral students (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Hall, 2010; NCES, 2013; NSF, 2012).

Black online, doctoral psychology students at FPCUs accrue large amounts of debt (Hall, 2010). Because they are most at risk for defaulting on their student loan (Hall, 2010), it is imperative that they have the skills necessary to complete their programs. Even though their cultural background might influence their ability to finish their programs, there was no information to elucidate what factors contribute to these students' ability to attain a doctorate in psychology at an FPCU. The next section covers literature related to impediments to achievement and success factors for online students.

Impediments to Success and Success Factors for Online Students

Several studies have addressed student persistence and student retention at FPCUs (Hall, 2010; Müller, 2008; Park & Choi, 2009; Willging & Johnson, 2004). Collectively,

the research findings have indicated that a variety of factors and variables enhanced and impeded online students' persistence. Researchers (e.g., Hachey et al., 2012; Hart, 2012; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Lee & Choi, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009) agreed that individual characteristics, institutional factors, and external factors both enhanced and impeded online students' persistence, but they have not reached consensus on why some online students drop out while other online students persist. Reasons cited to explain the impediments to achievement for online students were numerous and varied, and because the research findings have been inconsistent, it was unclear which of these factors or variables directly contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees at their FPCUs.

Black online doctoral students have reported being satisfied with online doctoral programs (Hall, 2010; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Müller, 2008; Park & Choi, 2009). However, research findings have indicated many online students reported overwhelming feelings of isolation and stress, particularly related to (a) negative views of online degrees, (b) student loan debt, and (c) their ability to gain employment upon attaining their degrees (Hall, 2010; Hart, 2012; Park & Choi, 2009). The themes of coursework overload, difficulty managing multiple responsibilities, and lack of preparedness prevailed in the results of several studies (e.g., Clark, 2013; Hall, 2010; Park & Choi, 2009; Willging & Johnson, 2004). Other impediments to achievement, in some research findings, were overcoming emotional hurdles, such as feelings of anxiety, fear, and frustration (Park & Choi, 2009; Willging & Johnson, 2004).

Müller (2008) conducted a comparative qualitative case study. Müller focused on the reasons why women at a particular U.S. college persisted, dropped out, or stopped out of online courses and how perceived family factors hindered or supported the women's persistence. Müller found that the quality of the interaction with their classmates, the content, and their faculty were significant facilitators of persistence, but time management, displeasure with faculty, emotional hurdles, and technology problems were significant impediments to persistence. Müller recommended that institutions should (a) be more selective when they hire orientation faculty, (b) allow experienced online instructors to mentor inexperienced online faculty, (c) monitor their instructors' presence in their courses, and (d) conduct diagnostic testing of students' readiness for online learning.

Müller's (2008) study was limited to nine undergraduate and 11 graduate female students enrolled in online programs at one site. It was unclear whether these factors would also influence Black online, doctoral psychology students at FPCUs or male online doctoral psychology students the same. In contrast to Müller, Park and Choi (2009) concluded, "learners' age, gender, and educational level did not have a significant and direct effect on the dropout decision" (p. 215). Previous findings have indicated that student characteristics, such as SDL, readiness for SDL (SDLR), and Internet competency were influential in students' online learning experiences, persistence, and success (e.g., Clark, 2013; De Bruin, 2007; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Shinkarvera & Benson, 2007).

Other research findings indicated that there were associations between "active learning, love of learning, and independent learning" (Lai, 2011, p. 104) and online learning effectiveness. These were significant predictors of online learning effectiveness for some samples. However, Lai (2011) found "active learning was the strongest predictor in the regression model" (p. 104). Because other studies indicated that those characteristics had only a minor or an indirect effect (Park & Choi, 2009), the significance of students' characteristics in their dropping out or remaining in their programs was inconclusive.

Previous research findings also revealed that having access to online programs allowed adult students the opportunity to learn at- will and allowed them more flexibility in completing their degrees while also managing complex family schedules, social schedules, and work schedules (Clark, 2013; Hall, 2010; Flowers et al., 2012; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Müller, 2008). Other factors that researchers cited as enhancers or inhibitors of success for online students included family issues and support, professional issues and support as well as students' lack of training, level of study, poor technology skills, prior online learning experiences, and activity and conceptions of learning (Chou & Chen, 2008; Hachey et al., 2012; Kupczynski et al., 2011; Lee & Choi, 2011; Müller, 2008). Researchers have agreed that before adult online students can execute rational reflection, they should obtain a certain degree of development, such as SDLR. Shinkarvera and Benson's (2007) findings suggested that Internet-based learning cultivated self-directedness.

In some findings, students' SDLR was an essential prerequisite for success in online doctoral programs (Clark, 2013; Lai, 2011), and online students benefitted more when their interfaces with their course material, professors, and peers were meaningful (Müller, 2008; Richardson, 2010; Severiens & Wolff, 2008). For some samples, the challenge and convenience of learning online were rewarding and stimulating (Hall, 2010; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Müller, 2008), which suggested that these were important factors for these students' success. Despite the many unforeseen challenges and the many difficulties that were specific to learning online, researchers have concluded that online students' positive experiences outweighed these (Hall, 2010; Hart, 2012; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Müller, 2008). Conversely, this research has been limited to individuals in online courses and individuals in online work-related courses, and researchers have not considered the issues surrounding particular contexts of learning, such as dissertation processes in doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs.

In addition, the research has failed to consider culturally specific, personal factors and university-related factors that contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees at FPCUs. Because of the problem of Black student loan default, it is imperative that federal administrators as well as FPCU administrators and educators have a clearer understanding of the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs. FPCU administrators and educators need an in-depth understanding of success factors if they are to improve outcomes for this population. The paucity of literature in the area of online doctoral education may be a reason why some FPCUs are not to taking full advantage of the

possible progressive impact of their online doctoral psychology programs. In the next section, I review and synthesize literature pertaining to the dissertation phase of doctoral education, including literature pertaining to impediments to success and success factors, and potential issues for Black online doctoral psychology candidates.

The Dissertation

The dissertation is important because it informs graduate students' transition into the role of the independent researcher. All doctoral candidates are required to show that they are competent for research before beginning the dissertation. Previous research on the dissertation phase of doctoral education has focused on one topic. The topic related to why graduate students perform well during the graduate coursework phase, but have adverse fates during the dissertation phase of doctoral education (Lovitts, 2008).

Lovitts (2008) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study, using creativity as a framework to understand what factors assist or hinder graduate students' ability to, successfully, transition to their new role of the "independent scholar," and what factors contribute to students' production of distinctive research and scholarship (p. 297). The study consisted of focus groups with "high-Ph.D.-productive faculty who had advised many doctoral students [at least 15] and who had sat on many dissertation committees [at least 36] both inside and outside the department" (p. 299). The focus group participants represented seven departments: "biology, engineering/electrical and computer engineering, physics/physics and astronomy, economics, (e) psychology, English, and history," and they worked at "two research-intensive universities: one private university and one public university" (p. 299). Lovitts found that the high-Ph.D.-producing faculty

recognized that analytical intelligence was necessary for students to procure the tools of their prospective trade when they transitioned to their new roles. Lovitts concluded that the question of why graduate students perform well during the graduate coursework phase, but have adverse fates during the dissertation phase of doctoral education remained elusive.

Other researchers examining online doctoral programs focused on the effectiveness of e-mentoring for online doctoral students (Columbaro, 2009). Although Columbaro found that many academic employers were inclined to believe that the mentoring in these programs is insufficient, the dissertation project is the responsibility of the learner (Lovitts, 2008). The NSF sponsored the doctoral initiative on minority attrition and completion (DIMAC; CGS, 2012a), which was a study that examined patterns of completion and attrition among underrepresented ethnic minority students in STEM doctoral programs across 21 institutions (CGS, 2012a). The survey results indicated that under extremely advantageous circumstances, no more than 75% of students entering these programs completed their degrees even though most of them possessed the academic aptitude to do so (CGS, 2012b). Even though this finding suggests that the phenomenon of successfully completing the dissertation is complex, the researchers did not detail how ethnic minority students successfully endure the dissertation, particularly Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs.

It was possible that the findings may or may not have been applicable to Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs because

FPCUs' s online doctoral programs are a distinct contrast to distance education and traditional highly selective research-intensive doctoral programs. Even if the arrangement and structure of doctoral programs at FPCUs, and the phenomenon of online doctoral education is relatively new, the goal of doctoral education continues to be to prepare individuals for lifelong learning as evidenced by lifelong inquest, research, and scholarship (CGS, 2012a, 2012b; Lovitts, 2008; NCES, 2013; NSF, 2012). Higher attrition rates among Black doctoral students accentuate the problems of Black underrepresentation within doctoral education and Black underrepresentation within the academic workforce (Hall, 2010; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008).

The literature was clear regarding the 60% of Black doctoral students who do not persist through the dissertation (Hunn-Merriweather, 2008). The literature did not detail how 40% of Black doctoral students successfully endure the dissertation, particularly Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs. No researchers have specifically explored how Black online students who finished their degrees at an FPCU experience of completing the dissertation at an FPCU although national data have showed that there is a general underrepresentation of Black graduate students in the psychology field at the doctoral level (CGS, 2012a). Over time, changes in the U.S. administration, economy, population, and societal changes and high technology advancements, according to NSF (2012), has translated into changes in the characteristics of doctorate recipients.

At the time of the current study, some of these changes are a change in the time it takes to complete doctoral study, an increased representation of ethnic minority doctorate

recipients, and a reduction in postdoctorate employment opportunities (NSF, 2012). Doctorate recipients are indicators of increased investments in human resources that governments allocate to engineering, research, scholarship, and science. Governments monitor the number of doctorate recipients closely because they provide measures of a nation's fitness to create awareness and progress in numerous domains (NSF, 2012). Understanding Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs experiences of successfully completing dissertation experiences at their FPCUs is vitally important to improving their persistence and their professional success.

Doctoral students, in most cases, have to complete core courses, electives, residencies, and a dissertation. The dissertation includes a research prospectus, a research proposal, a research study, and a research write-up. These are necessary for complete Black students to complete their online doctoral psychology programs successfully. Once the students have completed courses and electives, they are candidates for the doctorate. They have ABD status.

During this phase, doctoral candidates form their dissertation committee. The committee usually consists of three faculty members: two from within their disciplines and one from any discipline. Usually, the candidates have to solicit these individuals themselves, using the FPCU's list of available faculty and their prospectus. The prospectus is a general snapshot of the candidates' research topic, which comprises a social problem that they want to address.

The candidates, then, transform their topic into a research problem. When the candidates' dissertation committee and the FPCU's research office approve their

prospectus, they advance to their research proposal. Their proposals contain the first three chapters of the dissertation. They work with their dissertation committees to ensure that the proposal aligns with the FPCUs guidelines, relative to its content and its methodology.

In essence, the dissertation is the application of the scientific method to address a social problem. It also can be viewed as the application of traditional problem-solving steps to a social problem, connecting it to a research problem. Because it is an actual research study, the FPCU's institutional review board (IRB) must ensure that the study is ethically sound, ensuring that the study is humane and circumventing harm to the participants.

The candidates' research project goes through several reviews by various people at the institution. They have to present an oral defense of both the research proposal and the completed research study. Once they have met all these requirements, the university's chief academic officer completes a final review, and they have to have the work published after the chief academic officer approves the research. The remaining sections focus on impediments to success and success factors for Black doctoral candidates during the dissertation and possible issues for Black online doctoral candidates.

Impediments to Success and Success Factors for Black Doctoral Candidates during the Dissertation

Several researchers have generally examined factors that impeded or supported success for doctoral students. Ivankova and Stick (2007) explored factors that enhanced students' in persistence in a distributed doctoral program. They focused on a diverse

sample of doctoral students at a highly selective research-intensive TCU. The students were not pursuing a doctorate in psychology.

The reasons cited to explain Black doctoral candidates' failure and success were numerous and varied. Most of these pertained to students in doctoral programs at HBCUs, PWIs, and ILIs (e.g., Fountaine, 2012; Gasman et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2010; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008). Because of the unique structure of FCPUs' online doctoral programs in general, it was likely that the findings will not be the same for a sample of Black doctorate recipients who finished an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU. To know what improvements are necessary in the U.S. doctoral education system, particularly for FPCUs online doctoral programs, U.S. government officials need to understand how these are connected (NSF, 2012).

Researchers tended to group the reasons to explain Black doctoral candidates' failure and success into two categories that included internal and external variables. The most prevalent contributing factors cited were a lack of Black role models in academic roles and a lack of student motivation (e.g., Gasman et al., 2008).Other commonly cited included advisor- or faculty-related factors, culture-related factors, program-related factors, university-related factors, learner-related factors, and peripheral factors (Fountaine, 2012; Gasman et al., 2008; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008; Ivankova & Stink, 2007; Lovitts, 2008). The first reason has particularly generated controversy around the question of how FPCUs are able to provide online doctoral students with effective mentoring (Columbaro, 2009).

Graduate programs aim to ensure that students have the information and the expertise necessary for their professional development, and they also "serve the important purpose of socializing students into distinct occupational roles" (Gasman et al., 2008, p. 130). Several researchers have emphasized the essentiality of doctoral students' socialization (e.g., Gasman et al., 2008). They have maintained that how faculty socialized Black doctoral candidates regarding the norms and values associated with their roles as professors and or as scholar-practitioners is essential for postdoctorate success (Gasman et al., 2008; Lovitts, 2008). Therefore, mentoring plays a vital role in postdoctorate outcomes for these students.

Empirical findings have shown that generally Black online doctoral candidates' experiences with their advisors, faculty, and professors have been both positive and negative (Hall, 2010). How Black online, doctoral psychology candidates are socialized at FPCUs, how they perceive the role of their mentors, and how they perceive their relationships with their mentors were unknown. However, these relationships have the potential to influence Black doctoral psychology candidates' success, and although the dissertation phase informs doctoral candidates' change from student to independent researcher, they still may require some guidance from their faculty mentors. It was crucial to understand these factors because of the structure of FPCUs and the inconsistency surrounding the meaning and the role of mentors. The confusion surrounding the meanings of this term and the possibility of stereotype threat supported the necessity for having dialogues with Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs.

Within the narratives of Black graduate students in doctoral programs where they were the numerical minority in the classroom, many felt that they had to perform well above their White peers (Gasman et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2010). This contributed to their struggle when their acumen or research topic was devalued (Gasman et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2010). In addition, doctoral candidates' success was impeded when their learning style did not match with how their mentors facilitated mentoring, and doctoral candidates' success was impeded when their views of mentoring and their views of their roles in the mentoring relationship are not the same as their mentors' views (Lovitts, 2008). Other findings have indicated that Black doctoral psychology candidates who finished their degrees at an FPCU will have felt motivated to use a deep approach to the dissertation project when their mentors interacted with them on an informal basis: welcoming them into their professions, being available for and open to their questions, and being genuinely concerned about their development (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). However, if Black doctoral psychology candidates are not ready or are not motivated to complete the research project, it is likely that they will not follow through on completing the dissertation (Lovitts, 2008).

Other factors cited as facilitating or impeding success for Black doctoral candidates included their creative ability, intelligence, motivation, prior research experience, willingness to work hard and to put forth initiative, and perseverance in the face of continuous failure (Lovitts, 2008). A mismatch between the candidates' thinking styles and the required tasks for independent research within their specific disciplines or fields and strong intellectual curiosity were also cited in the literature cited as facilitating

or impeding success (CGS, 2012b; Lovitts, 2008). Richardson (2010) concluded that for ethnic minority students, differences in how the students conceived learning explained the variances in the students' approaches to learning. However, according to Torrance and Mourad (1978), the students' "creative experiences and achievements" were "associated with learners' readiness for using SDL" (p. 1170).

Lovitts (2008) concurred with Torrance and Mourad (1978). Lovitts noted that students' creativity helped facilitate their natural instinct to solve problems. Lovitts added that doctoral candidates' instinctiveness in problem-solving was essential for their transitions into independent researcher role. Edmondson et al. (2012) found that one strategy business students used to answer these curiosity-induced information gaps was SDL.

Edmondson et al. (2012) also found that students who possessed high levels of SDL traits, particularly creativity, were active students who autonomously managed their own learning. They were independent learners and efficient problem-solvers who enjoyed learning (Boyer et al., 2014; Shinkarvera & Benson, 2007). When they needed information, the students' inquisitiveness impulsively drove them to search within their surroundings to find the information they needed (Edmondson et al., 2012; Richardson & Newby, 2006). When Knowles (1975) discussed self-directed learners' practical use of the resources, Knowles emphasized that they were meticulous regarding the aspects of the resources that were useful.

Francis and Flanigan (2012) and Lovitts (2008) pointed out that problematic for highly self-directed students and some doctoral candidates is their tendency to become

absorbed in information that they found interesting. However, the information was often irrelevant to their dissertation topic (Lovitts, 2008). This resulted in unclear knowledge that inaccurately represented the subject (Lovitts, 2008). This suggests that students' ability to conduct SDL has a role in their successful completion of the dissertation.

The expectation, at the dissertation phase, is that Black doctoral psychology candidates are competent. They should have the aptitude to complete a creative project because in addition to having access to the Internet, their undergraduate and graduate education provided them with everything necessary to do so (Chu et al., 2012; Lovitts, 2008). The general assumption is that candidates should be (a) responsible enough to develop an idea, (b) driven to follow through on that idea, (c) able to locate necessary resources with occasional interaction with their mentors, and (d) able to produce an independent research project (Lovitts, 2008). Processes used to determine the usefulness of information was essential for developing the research project (Lovitts. 2008).

These processes determined the degree to which doctoral candidates produced a notable or a less notable dissertation research study (Lovitts, 2008). There was some consensus that students who were more adept at learning independently were most likely to experience success in an online doctoral program (Boyer et al., 2014; Lovitts, 2008). The cultural, educational, social context of learning as well as previous experiences, applicable study skills, self-concept, and subject matter have the potential to determine the degree to which this level of self-directedness is possible (Bhat et al., 2007; Sabbaghian, 1979; Shinkarvera & Benson, 2007). This emphasized the importance of understanding self-direction for this study of Black FPCU doctorate recipients' academic

achievement. In the next section, I review and synthesize studies related to potential issues that specifically relate to Black online doctoral candidates' cultural backgrounds and the online learning context.

Potential Issues with Completing the Dissertation for Black Online Doctoral Candidates

Only one study has focused exclusively on the population of Black students enrolled in an online doctoral program at an FPCU (e.g., Hall, 2010). From the study, the average Black online doctoral student was between 25- and 54-years-old (Halls, 2010). Most had attended HBCUs or PWIs (Hall, 2010). They had entered online doctoral programs for various reasons (Hall, 2010).

The literature indicated that even if most Black doctoral candidates entered online doctoral psychology programs voluntarily, they also had responsibilities and situations that can adversely affect their dissertation progress (Cercone, 2008; Hall, 2010; Müller, 2008; Park & Choi, 2009; Willging & Johnson, 2009). Similarly, researchers also have suggested that the learning styles and life experiences that Black online, doctoral psychology candidates brought with them into the dissertation phase could prove to either provide a critical foundation for their success or prove to provide inherent beliefs that could encumber their change to independent researchers (Cercone, 2008; Clark, 2013; Lovitts, 2008). These could be problematic for nontraditional Black doctoral candidates. Because they are older, they are accustomed to the old traditional ways of instruction that placed students in a passive role (Cercone, 2008; Clark, 2013).

Nontraditional online students included adult students who were older (Müller, 2008; Cercone, 2008). They had organized their classes around their work and their family duties (Müller, 2008; Cercone, 2008). They should have the aptitude to complete a creative project because in addition to having access to the Internet, their undergraduate and graduate education provided them with everything necessary to do so (Chu et al., 2012; Lovitts, 2008). This suggests that their predoctoral and preonline learning experiences have the potential to influence how they experience the dissertation phase.

Research findings have indicated that generally nontraditional online students had a tendency to be insecure in the decisions they needed to make (Müller, 2008; Cercone, 2008). Although their predoctoral and preonline learning experiences have the potential to influence how they experience the dissertation phase, the question of how Black online doctoral candidates in a doctoral program that is different from the discipline in which they attained their undergraduate and their graduate education successfully experience the dissertation phase at FPCUs remained unanswered. Even if FPCUs allowed adults to enter any program of their choice, and they disregarded the adults' educational backgrounds or qualifications (Hall, 2010; Lynch et al., 2010), the literature noted that the expectation, at the dissertation phase, is that Black online, doctoral psychology candidates are competent for conducting research (Lovitts, 2008). Because the research has failed to address this topic, there was a need to explore whether this strategy is helping or hurting Black online doctoral psychology candidates whose undergraduate and graduate education were not in psychology.

In addition, researchers have underscored subtle forms of discrimination against Black doctoral students. They have uncovered a disinterest and distaste for culturally based scholarship, such as the unworthiness that some White faculty at ILIs inferred about dissertation topics focusing on issues specific to African Americans (Gasman et al., 2008). Such inferences potentially can affect Black online, doctoral psychology students motivation and persistence because doctoral candidates choose research topics relating to their concerns and interests. Because researchers have not addressed this issue in the literature, the question of how Black doctoral psychology candidates at FPCUs perceive the reception of their research topics remained unanswered.

Despite the many strides toward equality for Black people, the continuous structured inequality in American society contributes to the failure of Black graduate students (Hall, 2010). It also has the potential to influence how they persist after they have attained doctoral candidacy. Research findings from studies of Black students have indicated that there are associations between Black students' experiences of ethnic discrimination and academic disengagement (Cokley, 2002). They also have indicated that there are associations between Black students' experiences of stereotype threat and their self-concept and their academic achievement (see Cokley, 2002).

Similarly, earlier researchers found strong positive relationships between SDL and several adult learning constructs, including students' self-concept (e.g., Sabbaghian, 1979). Because the findings have been inconsistent, it was necessary to explore these phenomena in the context of the successful completion of the dissertation process for Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs.

Examining the dissertation process at multiple FPCUs, using qualitative approaches and involving Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their programs at various FPCUs as co-researchers, the current study helps stakeholders better understand how Black FPCU doctorate recipients attain their degrees.

Having an in-depth understanding of how Black online, doctoral candidates experience success and what factors contribute to their success will help researchers separate variables and design more effective models for FPCUs' online doctoral psychology programs, so administrators and mentors at FPCUs can plan interventions to enhance Black online, doctoral psychology students' dissertation experiences. Similarly, federal administrators can make sound decisions regarding changes in student loan repayment policies. Academic employers and general employers will have more insight into the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs and the factors that contribute to their finishing their degrees at an FPCU. With academic employers and general employers having such insight, they might change their attitudes toward online doctoral programs and FPCU doctoral recipients, and they might become more willing to hire Black FPCU doctorate recipients. The summary and conclusions follow.

Summary and Conclusions

The number of African American citizens attaining college degrees, including a doctorate, indicated upward trends from 2010 to 2013 (Census Bureau, 2012, 2014). Data have indicated that Black students represented the largest ethnic minority group to attain conferred doctorates in the field of education (NSF, 2012), but the percentage of Black

students receiving a conferred doctorate in psychology had decreased (NSF, 2012). Researchers have discovered that the degree to which graduate students were able to conduct SDL and to self-direct depended largely on their self-concept (see Guglielmino, 1977; Rutland, 1987; Sabbaghian, 1979), and there were associations between academic achievement and various factors and variables, including culture, self-concept, and ethnic- or racial-identity (e.g., Cokley, 2002; Elion et al., 2012). Ethnic minority status affected Black college students' academic achievement, experiences, performance, and persistence as well as Black college students' learning techniques and the quality of what they learned (e.g., Henfield et al., 2010; Kelly, 2012; Richardson, 2010).

Even though some institutions have moved away from requiring the GRE for admission, the research findings indicated that racial discrimination continues to be an issue for American Americans, particularly within the context of the doctoral education system at TCUs (Hall, 2010; Gasman et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2010; Hunn Merriweather, 2008). There has been a surge in African American adults' college enrollment (Census Bureau, 2012, 2014), but Black students in doctoral programs in the adult education and counselor education disciplines at ILIs and PWIs continue to experience negative contacts and experience prejudice with faculty, peers, and staff (see Gasman et al., 2008; Hunn Merriweather, 2008). They also perceived differences between how faculty treated them and how faculty treated White doctoral students (see Hall, 2010; Henfield et al., 2010). Environmental cues, such as Black students being aware of the low number of Black students in a learning setting and students being bombarded with negative stereotypes about African Americans' academic

underachievement, endorsed the hypothesis that they did not fit within a particular educational setting (Cokley 2002; Mallett et al., 2011).

For ethnic minority students, in general, recalling discriminatory experiences or reflecting on their group membership was enough to perpetuate belonging uncertainty (Mallett et al., 2011). Black students responded to feeling socially disconnected and feeling uncertain about whether they belonged within a particular learning situation in ways that were both favorable and unfavorable for their academic success (Gasman et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2010; Mallett et al., 2011). Black doctoral students at HBCUs profited from the company and the leadership of Black professors (Fountaine, 2012). However, FPCUs have been effective in eliminating some culturally based barriers, such as low GPA and low GRE scores and minimizing racism generally for ethnic minority online students (Hall, 2010; Maeder & Wiener, 2010; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2011).

Within FPCUs' structure, adult students can develop higher self-efficacy (Chou & Liu, 2005). A variety of factors and variables enhanced and impeded online students' persistence (Hall, 2010; Müller, 2008). Reasons cited to explain the impediments to achievement for online students were numerous and varied. However, student characteristics, such as SDL, SDLR, and Internet competency were influential in students' online learning experiences, persistence, and success (e.g., Clark, 2013; De Bruin, 2007; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Shinkarvera & Benson, 2007).

Online students benefitted more when their interfaces with their course material, professors, and peers were meaningful (Müller, 2008; Richardson, 2010; Severiens & Wolff, 2008). There were associations between "active learning, love of learning, and

independent learning" (Lai, 2011, p. 104) and online learning effectiveness; these were significant predictors of online learning effectiveness for some samples. Lai found "active learning was the strongest predictor in the regression model" (p. 104). However, other findings indicated that those characteristics had only a minor or an indirect effect (Park & Choi, 2009), and many online students reported overwhelming feelings of isolation and stress, particularly related to (a) negative views of online degrees, (b) student loan debt, and (c) their ability to gain employment upon attaining their degree (Hall, 2010; Hart, 2012; Park & Choi, 2009).

Between July 1, 2011 and June 30, 2012, FPCUs represented 48% of the U.S. institutions that had Title IV contracts (Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013). Researchers have learned that Black adults who desired a doctorate chose to attend FPCUs because at TCUs they had to meet particular gatekeeper measures (Hall, 2010). Some Black online doctoral students reported that TCUs placed them on long waiting lists even though they had passed the GRE while others balked at the GRE or postponed enrolling in a doctoral program because of the GRE (Hall, 2010). Black graduate students were most likely to enroll in FPCUs, which have minimal or no admission requirement (Aud et al., 2013).

Researchers also know that approximately 50% of FPCU students do not complete their programs (Di Pierro, 2012) and that generally an estimated 60% of Black doctoral candidates do not complete the dissertation phase while another 60% default on their student loan (Hall, 2010; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008). They know that when students were intrinsically motivated, they were more creative and were likely to complete the dissertation phase with ease (Lovitts, 2008). In addition, researchers know that students

who possessed high levels of SDL traits, particularly creativity, were active students who autonomously managed their own learning (Edmondson et al., 2012). They also know that there are strong positive relationships between SDL and several adult learning constructs, including students' self-concept (e.g., Sabbaghian, 1979) and that there are associations between Black students' experiences of ethnic discrimination and academic disengagement and between Black students' experiences of stereotype threat and their self-concept and their academic achievement (e.g., Cokley, 2002).

Researchers know that Black online doctoral students' experiences with their advisors, faculty, and professors have been both positive and negative (Hall, 2010). They know that incongruence between learning environments and a learner's characteristics is associated with students' affective responses (e.g., displeasure, frustration, and irritation; Grow, 1991b; Long, 1989). They know that that various forms of support aided Black graduate students' persistence (Henfield et al., 2010). They know that humanizing the practice of academic advising, using a multifaceted approach to advising, and delivering proactive academic advising generally benefited ethnic minority students (Museus & Ravello, 2010).

Researchers also know that the quality of the interaction with their classmates, the content, and their faculty were significant facilitators of online graduate students' persistence, but time management, displeasure with faculty, emotional hurdles, and technology problems were significant impediments to persistence (Müller, 2008). They know that Black students who finished their degree at PWIs developed an intense sense of responsibility to their communities and families, which motivated them to complete

their programs (Hunn-Merriweather, 2008). Despite the accommodating structure of FCPUs, high student attrition rates (Di Pierro, 2012) and low student graduation rates (Lynch et al., 2010) continue to characterize FPCUs. The reasons for these phenomena were not clear.

Researchers have not reached consensus on why some online students drop out while other online students persist. The research findings have been inconsistent. It was unclear which factors or variables directly contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degree. Conversely, researchers know relatively nothing about the dissertation process at FPCUs.

The question of how Black online doctoral candidates in a doctoral program that was different from the discipline in which they attained their undergraduate and their graduate education experience the dissertation phase at FPCUs remained unanswered. It was unclear whether Black students' motivation to complete their programs is more extrinsic or intrinsic. It was not clear exactly how Black online, doctoral psychology students experience SDL. How they develop the capacity for SDL and capitalize on the SDL processes, particularly in the context of successfully completing their doctoral program at their FPCUs, was less clear.

In addition, the meaning of "mentor" and the roles for people serving in these capacities was unclear. How Black online, doctoral psychology students in doctoral psychology programs are socialized at FPCUs, how these students perceive the role of their mentors, and how they perceive their relationships with their mentors were unknown. The question of how Black doctoral psychology candidates at FPCUs perceive

the reception of their research topics remained unanswered. Researchers know relatively nothing about Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degree at an FPCU, and the questions of how Black FPCU doctorate recipients experience the transition into the role of independent researcher as online doctoral psychology candidates at FPCUs, and what factors contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degree remained unanswered.

Based on the literature reviewed, there is a need for a more in-depth understanding of the experience of academic achievement for Black FPCU psychology, doctorate recipients, and there is a need to know more about the factors that contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degree at an FPCU. The current study filled this gap in the literature by focusing on Black online, doctoral psychology students who successfully completed online doctoral psychology programs offered by FPCUs. Addressing the question of how these doctorate recipients successfully changed into the independent researcher at FPCUs, I explored the experience of completing an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU for Black online doctoral psychology students who finished their degree at an FPCU. I also explored the factors that contribute to their finishing their degree at an FPCU, which extended the current knowledge in the discipline. In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology used for the current study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The objective of this phenomenological study was to add to the current literature by applying a naturalistic-interpretative paradigm to understand the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU. I intended to describe the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate in psychology at an FPCU. I divided the remainder of this chapter into several sections. In these sections, I discuss the research design and rationale, my role as the researcher, the methodology, and the summary, and in the research design and rationale section, I explain the phenomenological research design and my rationale for its use in this study.

In the section next section, I discuss my activities, as the researcher. The methodology section follows, and in the methodology section, I explain my logic for participant selection, including the strategies I used for sampling and selecting participants, and my instrumentation. In this section, I describe the procedures I used for recruitment, participation, and data collection, including ethical procedures and my data analysis plan. I also address issues of trustworthiness and my subjectivity and reflexivity in this section, including issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In the final section, I present a brief summary of the main points.

Research Design and Rationale

The research questions were an outgrowth of previous research findings. I developed them from other researchers' recommendations for future research. What is the

meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who finished an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU was the central question I sought to answer. The following were subquestions:

1. What is the lived experience of Black students who completed an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU?
2. What are the factors that contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees at an FPCU?

Black FPCU doctorate recipients' academic achievement was the central phenomenon of interest. At this stage in the research, Black FPCU doctorate recipients' academic achievement referred to their successful completion of an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU. A phenomenological approach was appropriate because researchers know relatively nothing about the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU or the factors that contribute to their finishing their degrees at an FPCU (Creswell, 2013). Describing one or more individual's perceptions of a specific phenomenon is the overall purpose of the phenomenology tradition.

A quantitative design lacked the features necessary to capture the crucial information necessary to address to the problem. If I followed quantitative research traditions, I would have been unable to capture rich qualitative data. I also would have been unable to gain a full understanding of the meaning of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon. Because phenomenology research is descriptive and interpretive

(Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994), the research study complemented the literature. Through the research, I filled some gaps in the knowledge (Creswell, 2013).

The application of a phenomenological design in an exploration of the effectiveness of FPCUs' doctoral psychology programs will help academic employers, employers, policymakers, and administrators of FPCUs understand the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU. It will also help them to understand what factors contribute to their finishing their degrees at an FPCU. Following the phenomenology tradition allowed me to focus on seven individuals who shared the experience of finishing an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU while opposing the subject-object dichotomy (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). I was also able to reconcile different meanings in the themes of the experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Role of the Researcher

My role in this phenomenological study was to collect, to analyze, and to interpret phenomenological data obtained from the participants during the interviews (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). I was the key instrument for data collection. I interviewed participants undue manipulating the research conditions, sites, or situations (Creswell, 2013; Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). I implemented all research-related procedures. Because I randomly selected the study sample from a pool of Internet users, I did not have any personal or professional relationships with participants that involved me having any power over the participants.

In phenomenological research, researchers use bracketing, to manage their bias. Bracketing refers to the process that researchers use to lay aside their experiences. They do this in order to "take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under investigation" (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). In carrying out bracketing, I explored my own cultural background, my graduate school experiences, and other factors that might have biased my interpretations; I addressed these in the epoché.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The population I targeted for the current study included Black adults who graduated from a doctoral psychology program offered at an FPCU within the past 5 years. Typically, policies and studies examining ethnic minority students and cultural influences on their academic achievement employ quantitative normative measures that use predominantly White samples. I used a unique-criterion-purposive sampling strategy. I chose this sampling strategy because the objective for the current study was to add to the current literature by applying a naturalistic-interpretative paradigm to understand the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU.

I intended to describe the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate in psychology at an FPCU. I focused on this group because they had experienced the phenomenon under study. Their backgrounds aligned with the study's purpose. Their knowledge of the phenomenon provided in-depth information regarding the research questions.

From the current literature and statistics (e.g., Gasman et al., 2008; Hall, 2010; Lovitts, 2008; NCES, 2013; NSF, 2012), a unique selection was necessary because the "success" phenomenon at the doctoral psychology level in the online learning environment at FPCUs is notably unusual, particularly for Black students. Employing a unique sampling strategy was useful for me to glean the most information about the research questions. Using a criterion sampling strategy was appropriate for me to obtain information-rich cases that were helpful for exposing quality assurance issues, such as major system breakdowns or flaws that can be improved (Creswell, 2013; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008; Patton, 2001). Other researchers used unique sampling, purposeful sampling, and criterion sampling strategies in investigations of successful online learning and in investigations of success factors for Black graduate students who were pursuing doctorates or who attained a doctorate at a PWI (e.g., Chou, 2013; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008).

Because of the nature of the research questions, a purposive sample was appropriate for me to select specific individuals who were information-rich and who possessed certain experiences and knowledge (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2001). Researchers used a small purposive sample in investigations of Black online doctoral students who were attending an FPCU or who had previously graduated from an FPCU (e.g., Hall, 2010). From the information they captured, it was clear that a small purposive sample of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees in any doctoral psychology program at any FPCU would have been able to provide information. They would have both the experience and the knowledge that I sought.

Participants were appropriate for selection if they met particular criteria: (a) they completed their doctoral education at an FPCU that delivered at least 80% of the program online, and (b) they attained a conferred doctorate in psychology at an FPCU within the past 5 years. Using a screening tool, I screened each research respondent to establish that he or she met the criteria. When they indicated an ethnic or a racial preference of African American or Black, and when they indicated that they met the above criteria, I knew that participants met the criteria. I attempted to recruit at least 10 individuals to participate in the study.

My rationale for this number was that qualitative research seeks to explicate certain information; it does not seek to generalize information (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In empirical phenomenological studies, researchers tended to include a smaller sample size, and they acquired the critical structures of a given phenomenon through dialogues, specifically with individuals who shared similar life experiences (e.g., Chou, 2013; Kelly, 2012). Immediately following IRB approval, I recruited participants using two approaches: maximum variation and snowballing. Several researchers have used variations of these approaches to recruit Black participants (e.g., Hall, 2010; Kelly, 2012).

From the reviewed literature, it was likely that I would have a problem with finding Black FPCU doctorate recipients who had completed a doctoral psychology program at an FPCU. Most Black doctoral students pursue degrees in education (NSF, 2012). Currently, four institutions offer online doctoral psychology programs: Capella

University, Walden University, the University of Phoenix, and the University of the Rockies.

Using the maximum variation approach, I invited several individuals from various FPCUs to participate in the study. I distributed flyers at local predominantly Black churches and local libraries within a 50-mile radius of my home. Because LISTSERVS, social media sites, and public service announcements provided variations based on where the participant lives, I also posted announcements on Facebook, Methodspace bulletin boards, and bulletin boards within professional communities in which I am involved. I asked local radio stations to make public service announcements using the information in the flyers.

I also used the snowball approach to recruit participants. The snowball approach employs the "word-of-mouth" concept. I asked individuals if they knew someone who had experienced the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2001). I invited people who knew Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU to put the individuals in contact with me. Using this approach, I accessed and located information-rich individuals who had doctorates in psychology (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2001). All recruitment documents and texts of recruitment materials are in Appendix A, including the Study Distribution Flyer, the Study LISTSERV and Social Media Announcement, and the Researcher's Respondent Screening Tool.

After receiving responses from the study announcements and after establishing that the respondent met the inclusion requirements, I replied with an e-mail that oriented

the respondent to the study. It contained copies of the Letter of Introduction and the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B). In the letter, I introduced myself, including my name, academic status, contact information, and institution affiliation. In the letter, I also included a brief synopsis the research topic and the background of the study, the reason for the study, and the requirements for participation in the study. In the consent form, I provided an explanation of why I was conducting the study, including its purpose and procedures.

I provided a few sample questions that I would ask the participant in the consent. I also included statements pertaining to the voluntary nature of the study, the benefits and risks, the compensation, the contacts for questions as well as a statement pertaining to the participants' privacy and a statement of consent. To ensure that the respondents fully understood these and that they were willing to be participants, I asked them to respond to the e-mail with the words, *I consent*. These words were indicative of their confirming that they understood the information and that they were consenting to be participants in the study. I also suggested that they save the consent form for their records.

I sent each respondent an e-mail , within 24 hours of receiving the respondent's consent, to identify participants for the study. It contained a copy of the Participant Demographic Sheet in Appendix B. In the demographic sheet, I included questions regarding general background information, such as the respondent's age, educational background, gender, and program of study. Based on the information contained in these sheets, I purposefully selected a sample of seven individuals to participate in the study.

Within 24 hours of my decision, I sent participants e-mail notifications of non-selection or selection. At that time, the participant and I scheduled the interview.

Instrumentation

I used the Researcher's Interview Protocol in Appendix C to collect data. The interview protocol was appropriate for helping me to answer the research questions. Applying the SDL theoretical foundation and culture as the contextual lens as described in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, I framed the interview questions, so I could capture information-rich data from Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs. The open-ended questions comprising the protocol derived from my review of the literature on the topic and from consultations with my dissertation committee and an outside expert on the topic.

The phenomenology tradition aims to describe one or more individual's experience of a specific phenomenon. I collected most of the data from interviews with the same individuals. The questions allowed them to provide an account of their experience of finishing their degrees in their own words. I recorded the interviews and transcribed the data into transcripts, which I stored as computer files that I later analyzed (Creswell, 2013).

Usually in cases where researchers know relatively nothing about a phenomenon, they find exploratory interviewing befitting for increasing their understanding of the phenomenon (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). Moustakas (1994) noted that reflective interpretation of the text is essential for obtaining a more effective and in-depth understanding. Moustakas emphasized that "the reflective-interpretive process includes

not only a description of the experience as it appears in consciousness but also an analysis and astute interpretation of the underlying conditions, historically and aesthetically [,] that account for the experience" (p. 10).

I designed questions one through nine to capture data pertaining to the first research question. I designed Questions 10 through 11 to capture data pertaining to the second research question. Combined, these answered the central research question. By having conversations with these graduates, I gained an understanding of their experience and the factors that contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees.

I assembled subjective evidence, based on the individual views and the subjective experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013). The maximum variation approach permitted me to uncover prevailing elements, dimensions, and themes across different FPCUs and across different specialties within the psychology domain, allowing me to document an array of differences (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2001). Involving various individuals from these FPCUs in the study, I maximized credibility and transferability of the findings because of the variations in each FPCU's doctoral psychology program curriculum and structure. Because of the variations in the participants' specialties, I capitalized on both individual and institutional differences and similarities, which provided insights into overall doctoral education experience.

The interview protocol allowed me to discover the meanings or "essences" attributed to the phenomenon as assumed and as shared by the participants in the study (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). I extracted important descriptions of the conscious

experience from the text of their responses to the questions in the interview protocol (Moustakas, 1994). From their exact words, I gained an understanding of the meaning of academic achievement for Black FPCU doctorate recipients by exploring the experience of finishing an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU with Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The unit of analysis for the current study was Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU. I carried out all data collection activities for this study. I collected data via one 60- to 90-minute telephone interview with each participant, using the interview protocol in Appendix C. Over a 4-week period, I collected phenomenological data from interviews with a unique-criterion-purposive sample of Black doctorate recipients who attained a conferred doctorate in psychology from an FPCU within the past 5 years.

I recorded each participant's interview using a digital audio recorder. I later transcribed and stored the information in computer files, which I analyzed and interpreted. I also collected data from FPCUs' literature and websites, official governmental websites, professional organizations' official websites, and published annual reports. These methods were consistent with phenomenological research, and using them assisted me in developing questions and in establishing a framework for the participants' experience.

To understand Black FPCU psychology doctorate recipients' academic achievement, it was necessary for me to explore their experience of all aspects of the online doctoral psychology program at the FPCUs that led to their successful graduation. I recorded data pertaining to the lived experience of this sample of Black students who completed an online doctoral psychology at an FPCU from the participants' responses to questions one through nine in the protocol. I recorded data pertaining to the factors that contribute to this sample of Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees at an FPCU from their responses to Questions 10 through 11.

Combing these, I recorded data pertaining to the meaning of academic achievement for this sample of Black doctorate recipients who finished an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU. I asked participants things, such as tell me what you did in order to complete the dissertation capstone; what was it about that particular area of psychology that piqued your interest. I also asked them questions such as who were the key people involved in your dissertation experience; what was your understanding of the dissertation capstone. The participants exited the study once I had ascertained the accuracy of their summarized interviews.

Data Analysis Plan

I applied Moustakas's (1994) modifications of van Kaam and Giorgi's inductive data analysis steps to each transcript of the participants' responses to questions in the interview protocol. I addressed the bias, experiences, and values that I brought into the study with me in the first step (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994) to maximize my objectivity and the study's confirmability. The second step consisted of my performing

phenomenological data reduction, and my goal was to gain an initial general sense of what kind of information the data were transmitting. Table 1 provides a summary of the plan I used for data collection and data analysis.

Table 1

Summary of Data Collection and Data Analysis Plan

Central Question	Subquestions	Interview Question	Data Analysis
What is the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who finished an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU?	RQ1: What is the lived experience of Black students who completed an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU?	Questions 1-9 in the researcher's interview protocol located in Appendix C.	Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological analysis steps will be used to organize all written transcripts as follows: 1. Address the bias, experiences, and values I brought into the study with me. 2. Read and reread transcripts to identify significant phrases or sentences, equally numerating them. 3. Sort, prioritize, and label equally numerated words, phrases, and passages. 4. Cluster them into categories as they relate to their specific research question; grouping them according to their relationship to provide the textual description. 5. Reducing the themes according to their relationships to provide textual-to-structural descriptions.
	RQ2: What are the factors that contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees at an FPCU?	Questions 10-11 in the researcher's interview protocol located in Appendix C.	

I read each interview transcript completely. This was the initial step towards gaining an understanding of what the experience meant (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The third step consisted of me performing two steps: hermeneutical data analysis and horizontalization of the data. This involved me generating a list that consisted of the significant statements contained within the transcript text.

My goal for hermeneutical data analysis was to improve the data collection process. Analyzing data collected from the first two interviews before I continued the remaining interviews, I ensured the credibility of the interview protocol (Creswell, 2013;

Moustakas, 1994). I made changes in my interview style and made changes to questions deriving from the analyzed data, following the IRB's approval.

My goal for horizontalization was to reach conciseness. Decreasing data and eliminating redundancy, I ensured that every horizon provided a necessary and relevant element of the experience, so I could label the elements of the experience (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). I highlighted the statements that were relevant to the Black FPCU doctorate recipient's academic achievement. I extracted statements that helped me to understand how the doctorate recipients experienced successfully finishing an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU.

These statements produced the "horizons" or "meaning units." The substance of each horizon or meaning unit was the same until my developed list was absent of repetitive and similar statements (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Then, I grouped the significant statements into larger information units, meaning units, and themes to generate clusters of meanings that comprised the textual description (Moustakas, 1994). When I determined that a horizon was unnecessary to appreciate the experience and when I determined that I could not label a particular horizon, I eliminated the horizon.

In the fourth step, I initiated the process of imaginative variation. My goal for the imaginative variation or structural description phase was to gain an understanding of the context and of the setting in which the Black FPCU psychology doctorate recipients' academic achievement was experienced. At this step, I sought "possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives,

different positions, roles, or functions" (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 97-98). I was searching for textual-to-structural descriptions of the Black FPCU psychology doctorate recipients' academic achievement, relative to *what* they experienced with successfully finishing their online doctoral psychology program at their FPCU (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

When I provided the textual description of the experience, I incorporated word-for-word examples of what transpired. At this time, I also inscribed a description of *how* the experience occurred (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The interview questions allowed me to explore and to identify undefined and new domains in the foundational conceptual model, to collapse domains into component and subcomponent elements, and to acquire positioning data regarding the background and history of the experience (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Concluding my analysis, I initiated the process of synthesis. My goal was to write a joint description of Black FPCU doctorate recipients' academic achievement that included the textual and the structural descriptions (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The concluding aspect of this phenomenological study characterized the meaning of the experience. When I described the essence of the experience, I included a section that informs the reader of how Black FPCU doctorate recipients experience successfully completing online doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs and what factors contribute to their finishing their degrees, and I highlighted the differences and similarities in the experiences. I carried out all data analysis activities. I did not use any data analysis software or discrepant cases in this study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent that I have learned what I stated I have discovered (Moustakas, 1994; Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). Researchers use at least two techniques to ensure trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nastasi & Schensul, 2005). I used member checks to maximize credibility for the current study. Following each interview, I e-mail ed the participants (member) a three to four page summary of my interpretation of their interview information. They reviewed (check) the information and ensured that the information resonated with what they shared regarding their experience and with the meaning they attached to the experiences.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree that my findings can be applicable for others (Moustakas, 1994; Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). I used maximum variation when I selected my sample, and I involved various individuals from various FPCUs in the study, which allowed me to I capitalize on both individual differences and similarities. The variations in each FPCU's doctoral psychology program curriculum and structure and the variations in the participants' specialties, allowed me capitalize on both program and institutional differences and similarities. These provided insights into overall doctoral education experience.

I also used rich thick descriptions. I used rich thick descriptions (a) of their lived experiences and the factors that contributed to their finishing their degrees at their chosen

FPCU, (b) of the phenomenon to illuminate the developing themes, and (c) to offer in-depth background descriptions. These allow others to transfer the findings.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the extent that the findings are consistent and the extent to which others may replicate the findings. My strategy to maximize dependability of the findings included the use of a qualitative expert and a reflexive journal. Even though some researchers used an expert panel (e.g., Guglielmino, 1977; Oddi, 1984), consulting with my dissertation committee and an outside qualitative research expert on the topic was just as effective.

The consultations were useful for ensuring the trustworthiness of my development of the interview protocol. They focused on my processes and questions. They were useful for ensuring that these aligned with the methods of phenomenological research. I used the information provided from the consultations to develop the questions that I included the interview protocol.

I used also reflexive journaling to maximize the study's dependability. Reflexive journaling is the process in which I observed my own personal feelings, impressions, and thoughts as these emerged when designing the research study and when performing data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation activities (Nastasi & Schensul, 2005). In collecting these observations, I determined "what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified" (Creswell, 2013, p. 21) relative to the epistemological assumptions. Researchers emphasized the effectiveness of keeping notes in a reflexive

journal. The notes were useful for adding depth of meaning to the interviews (Moustakas, 1994; Nastasi & Schensul, 2005).

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the authenticity of the internal consistency of the data, findings, elucidations, and recommendations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nastasi & Schensul, 2005). I used reflexivity as a strategy to maximize the confirmability of the findings. Reflexivity is a process in which I positioned myself in the writings (Creswell, 2013). It provided a means to circumvent subjective bias that could have obscured my objectivity.

Reflexivity was important because it allowed me to factor in my experiences as a Black online doctoral psychology student at an FPCU. Subsequently it also allowed me to be cognizant of how these might have plausibly shaped the findings, conclusions, and interpretations depicted in the study (Creswell, 2013). I acknowledged the bias, experiences, and values that I carried with me into the qualitative study at the beginning via the epoché (Creswell, 2013).

Ethical Procedures

Agreements and institutional permissions. I obtained agreements to gain access to Walden University's participant pool, to recruit potential participants. Appendix D contains all agreements and institutional permissions. It also contains the e-mail from Walden University's IRB approving me to recruit participants, to collect data, and to implement changes to this study. I also was aware of applicable state research regulations and of applicable state laws relevant to the data collection activities, including

participants' privacy, and I completed the "Protecting Human Research Participant" course offered by the National Institute of Health. These were necessary to ensure protection for research participants.

Vulnerable groups and privacy. I had an ethical obligation to do justice and to respect individual's dignity and rights (APA, 2002). I was unsure whether participants were members of any vulnerable group. During recruitment and implementation of the study, I did not include questions regarding emotional health, mental health, finances, housing, living arrangements, or pregnancy. Anyone meeting the inclusion criteria, consenting, and willing to participate were obliged to do so.

I did not pressure participants to participate. To protect the participants, I ensured that I fully and properly informed each participant prior to their consenting to participate in the study. I informed them that no one would penalize them if they withdrew from the study and that they could withdraw at-will. I also reassured them that if they withdrew I would exclude their data from the data analysis.

I e-mailed participants an informational package containing a letter of introduction and a consent form. The consent form included a section highlighting the voluntary nature of the study. It also included sections emphasizing the potential risks, the security measures for data and information, and the study procedures that were involved. In addition, to protect the participants' confidentiality and privacy during the telephone interviews, I conducted the interviews in my home-office; I was the only person who had access to this area of my home. The informed consent form alerted the participants regarding the potential for people, within their immediate area, overhearing

the conversation, and this clause was included under the confidentiality and privacy section of the consent form.

Data collection and intervention activities. Data collection was an essential feature of the research. I employed ethical data collection activities. I began data collection activities after the participants consented to participate. I ensured that measures were in place to address any unanticipated occurrences, such as adverse events and participants refusing or withdrawing from the study prior to its conclusion. No adverse events arose during the study; however, I was prepared to follow Walden University's procedures for handling these events.

Treatment of data. I treated data in a manner that maintained the participants' and the FPCUs' anonymity and confidentiality. I identified the participants' former FPCUs only for demographical purposes, such as the proportion of the study participants who attained a doctorate from a given FPCU. Because participants had to share one or more identifiers such as an e-mail address, a name, or a phone number, I was activated the blind carbon copy feature to protect their privacy when responding to recruitment, obtaining consent, and sending e-mail s. All participants remained in the study.

During all aspects of the current study, I made every effort to ensure participants' complete confidentiality and privacy. When I decided to include a respondent in the study and after I obtained consent, I assigned the participant a pseudonym. After I completed data collection, I did not maintain any link between the participants' pseudonyms and the direct identifiers.

Data storage, access, destruction, and dissemination. I stored study-related all audio and paper data in file folders. I labeled them, using the pseudonyms to conceal the participants' identities. I stored the digital recorder and paper files inside a locked file cabinet. I stored audio-recorded data on a jump drive and a password protected computer in my secured home-office.

I was the only person who had access to the computer, digital recorder, password, as well as to keys to the file cabinet and the office. I locked the office when it was not in use. I will store the data for 5 years, as required by Walden University, once I finish the study, and then, I will delete, shred, and burn the data. I will publish and discuss the findings in peer-reviewed journals and at professional conferences.

Summary

The objective of this phenomenological study was to add to the current literature by applying a naturalistic-interpretative paradigm to understand the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU. I intended to describe the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate in psychology at an FPCU. The research questions were an outgrowth of previous research findings. I developed them from other researchers' recommendations for future research.

A phenomenological approach was appropriate because researchers know relatively nothing about the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU or the factors that contribute to their finishing their degrees at an FPCU (Creswell, 2013). Describing one or more individual's

perceptions of a specific phenomenon is the overall purpose of the phenomenology tradition. Black FPCU doctorate recipients' academic achievement was the central phenomenon of interest.

I was the key instrument for data collection. I implemented all research-related procedures. I randomly selected the study sample from a pool of Internet users. The population I targeted for the current study included Black adults who graduated from a doctoral psychology program offered at an FPCU within the past 5 years.

I focused on this group because they had experienced the phenomenon under study. I used a unique-criterion-purposive sampling strategy because their knowledge of the phenomenon provided in-depth information regarding the research questions. All recruitment documents and texts of recruitment materials are in Appendix A. After I received responses to the announcements and checked to see if the respondents met inclusion criteria, I followed up with an e-mail that contained copies of the letter of introduction and the informed consent form in Appendix B.

To identify participants for the study, I sent each respondent an e-mail that contained a copy of the participant demographic sheet in Appendix B, within 24 hours of receiving the respondent's consent. I used the Researcher's Interview Protocol in Appendix C to collect data. The open-ended questions comprising the protocol derived from my review of the literature on the topic and from consultations with my dissertation committee and an outside expert on the topic. Applying the framework discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, I framed the interview questions, so I could capture information-rich data.

Usually in cases where researchers know relatively nothing about a phenomenon, they find exploratory interviewing befitting for increasing their understanding of the phenomenon (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). I primarily collected data via one 60- to 90-minute telephone interview with each participant, and over a 4-week period, I recorded each participant's interview using a digital audio recorder. I later transcribed and stored the information in computer files, which I analyzed and interpreted. These methods were consistent with phenomenological research, and using them assisted me in developing questions and in establishing a framework for the participants' experience.

I analyzed data using Moustakas's (1994) modifications of van Kaam and Giorgi's data analysis steps. Table 1 provides a summary of the plan I used for data collection and data analysis. I assembled subjective evidence, based on the individual views and the subjective experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013). I recorded and analyzed data pertaining to the first research question from the participants' responses to questions one through nine in the protocol and recorded and analyzed data pertaining to the second research question from their responses to Questions 10 through 11. Combing these, I recorded and analyzed data pertaining to the meaning of academic achievement for this sample of Black doctorate recipients who finished an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU.

I stored study-related all audio and paper data in file folders. I labeled them, using the pseudonyms to conceal the participants' identities. I stored the digital recorder and paper files inside a locked file cabinet. I stored audio-recorded data on a jump drive and a password protected computer in my secured home-office, and I was the only person who

had access to the computer, digital recorder, password, as well as to keys to the file cabinet and the office. I locked the office when it was not in use.

I used member checks, maximum variation, and rich thick descriptions to maximize credibility and transferability. To maximize dependability and confirmability, I used consultations with my dissertation committee and a qualitative expert, a reflexive journal, and reflexivity. Appendix D contains all agreements and institutional permissions. I present the results in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The objective of this phenomenological study was to explore how Black students in online psychology doctoral programs experience the dissertation capstone process. I specifically examined how a group of these students finished their degrees at FPCUs and what factors contributed to their success. The study was designed to create an in-depth understanding of the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate in psychology at an FPCU.

The research questions were an outgrowth of previous research findings. I developed them from other researchers' recommendations for future research. They focused on the lived experiences Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU and the factors that contribute to their finishing their degrees at their FPCU.

I divided this chapter into several sections. These sections present the study's results. The first sections provide the context and setting, the participants' demographical information, the data collection, and my epoché. The next section is a description of the data analysis. The sections that follow provide evidence of trustworthiness and present the results of the study. I conclude the chapter with a summary.

Context and Setting

Historical Context

Previous researchers indicated that students' cultural background affected their performance and persistence (Cokley, 2002; Elion et al., 2012; O'Brien et al., 2011).

Researchers also found that differences in students' cultural and academic backgrounds influenced exchanges between the educational setting and their "SDL, preferences, and motivation" (Francis & Flanigan, 2012, p. 11). These findings suggested that students' cultural backgrounds were influential in their learning experiences. Consequently, it was important to make the connection between the odyssey of socialization for Americans of African ancestry within American society, the present status of Black students, and the current experiences of African Americans within the graduate education system. Making these connections was essential for situating the current study of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU within the literature.

Historical context of African Americans' socialization. African Americans' socialization began around 1619 when European Americans annexed and or purchased African citizens from tribal chiefs on the continent of Africa (Rochon, 1997). This phenomenon, known as the Middle Passage, emerged when the European Americans shipped approximately 3,000,000 African denizens to North America, the new democratic land (Rochon, 1997). In America, the European Americans viewed the individuals their personal property. Viewing the individuals as personal property, European Americans treated the individuals as their personal property, and forced them into slavery, which suggests that this enslavement informs the cultural context for study participants because they are descendants of these individuals.

Their views of the enslaved individuals set in motion two phenomena: the ideologies of White-dominance and White-power (Hunter & Schmidt, 2010; Rochon, 1997). Consequently, although the enslaved individuals made every attempt to maintain a

sense of self, from the time the African denizens' were brought to America, "labels such as Slave, Nigger, Negro, African, Colored, Black, Afro-American, and African-American along with many other names have been used as terms of designation for people of African ancestry" (Rochon, 1997, p. 7). The European Americans acts, combined with the enslaved people being African natives, suggest that they were conditioned to be submissive to all White people (Hunter & Schmidt, 2010; Rochon, 1997).

The European Americans indoctrination and socialization of the enslaved individuals instilled the notion that African, Black, Negro, or Nigger depicted that, which was inferior or substandard while European or White represented that which was grandeur or honorable (Rochon, 1997, p. 60). They separated families, selling family members to owners of various plantations in order to support these concepts. They also frequently used public displays of physical punishment and murder when an enslaved person did not comply with any demand and did anything suggestive of trying to self-actualize (Rochon, 1997). This conditioning, combine with the European Americans' indoctrination and socialization of the enslaved individuals, also suggests that they were essentially socialized to live in distrust and in fear all White people (Hunter & Schmidt, 2010; Rochon, 1997).

Although this conditioning and socializing of the individuals also suppressed their identities, autonomy, and ability to self-actualize, they, despite their captivity, practiced their religious beliefs (Rochon, 1997). These beliefs were described as emotional and instinctive (Rochon, 1997, p. 58). The beliefs, ceremonies, customs, and language that comprised African culture distinguished them from the "White Man" (Rochon, 1997, p.

58). They also empowered the individuals' personal autonomy (within the slave quarters, of course), insulated them from the southern planters' oppression, and promoted a positive self-concept (Rochon, 1997).

The enslaved individuals lived under these conditions until the U.S. Congress amended the U.S. Constitution (Maeder & Wiener, 2010). This occurred nearly 3 centuries after the Middle Passage (Library of Congress, n.d.; Maeder & Wiener, 2010). The amendments were crucial to African Americans' socialization. The Thirteenth Amendment declared the enslaved individuals human beings, and thus made it illegal for a human being to outright own another human being as property (U.S. Const. amends. XIII), and to support the fact that the individuals were human beings, the Fourteenth Amendment endowed the formerly enslaved individuals with equal constitutional rights that included the right to receive an education (U.S. Const. amends. XIV). These amendments set in motion two important phenomena: legal citizenship and equal rights, particularly for Black people who lived in the southern region of the United States. This context, informs the basis of all African Americans', born in the United States, realities (Rochon, 1997).

Historical context of African Americans' education. Because the phenomenon of Black students attaining a doctorate in psychology at an FPCU is relatively new, it was necessary to understand African Americans' education within its historical context. This was necessary in order to ascertain the current difficulties and problems that exist for African American online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU, and to appreciate academic achievement for them. Although the U.S. Congress

had ended slavery and had extended constitutional rights to the freed Black citizens, its resolution in *Plessey v. Ferguson* (1896) mandated that Black students acquire their education at separate facilities, specifically for Black citizens. This ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court forced Black citizens to attend HBCUs.

The HBCUs' programs were not as challenging as the PWIs' programs (Hunn-Merriweather, 2008). Nor did the HBCUs offer postbaccalaureate opportunities (Hunn-Merriweather, 2008; Hunter & Schmidt, 2010; Library of Congress, n.d.; Rochon, 1997). Black students desiring a graduate degree had to attend PWIs. However, only a few PWIs accepted Black students.

To attend the PWIs, the students had to relocate although racial tension remained high during this time, particularly South and West of the United States. They had to leave their families and their friends if they wanted to attend these schools. This suggests that in the midst of the ongoing racial tension, Black students desiring a graduate education had to leave the security of their communities and had to trust that they would be safe (Hunn-Merriweather, 2008). Consequently, many Black students who had left to attend PWIs were often murdered.

The decision in *McLaurin v. Oklahoma Board of Regents of Higher Education* (1950) offered some relief for Black students and their families. The Court's ruling in this case allowed Black students to enter doctoral programs at all PWIs (U.S. Courts, n.d.). The ruling afforded Black adults more opportunities to broaden their range of study. It also provided them more opportunities to attend schools within their towns. The

resolution forbade direct interactions between the Black doctoral students and the White people on campus (Hunn-Merriweather, 2008; Rochon, 1997).

The U.S. Supreme Court was unable to see that segregation within the U.S. education system was unconstitutional. Evidence presented in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954, 1955) provided enough information for the Court to reconsider its earlier decision regarding segregation within the U.S. education system. The Court decided, "Separate school systems for blacks and whites are inherently unequal" (U.S. Courts, n.d., para. 12). It concluded that segregation was a significant breach "of the equal 'protection clause' of the Fourteenth Amendment" (U.S. Courts, n.d., para. 12). Its conclusion granted Black students a constitutional right to access to all U.S. public schools, which overturned the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision.

Subsequently Civil Rights Act (1964) mandated full integration of all public schools. It made racial discrimination within any U.S. public school unlawful (Henfield et al., 2010; Rowley & Wright, 2011). Following its passage, intense recruitment of African American students ensued, and recruitment efforts resulted in an increased number of Black graduate students entering doctoral programs (NSF, 2012). PWIs and similar institutions continue to use extreme measures to prevent enrollment for Black graduate students (Hall, 2010; Hunn-Merriweather, 2008; Maeder & Wiener, 2010).

Setting

America as an ethnosystem comprises a collection of ethnic groups that are interdependent and demarcated based on their unique historic and or cultural connections (Watson & Protinsky, 1988). Consequently, a solitary political system binds these ethnic

groups together (Watson & Protinsky, 1988). At the time of this study, data indicated that 44.5 million African American citizens lived in the United States in 2012. They comprised 13.1% of the population (Census Bureau, 2014), and economists have projected that the African American population will increase to 77.4 million individuals by 2060 (Census Bureau, 2014). This percentage, combined with predicted growth, suggests that the numbers of Black adults enrolling in online doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs will also increase.

Additional data collected by Census Bureau (2014) revealed that in 2013, there were 27,501,000 African American families residing in the United States. These families comprised 61.8% of the nation's households (Census Bureau, 2014). The data also indicated that 20,336,500 of these households were two-parent families (Census Bureau, 2014). Collectively, this percentage and predicted growth, suggests that the numbers of Black families will also increase.

In 2012 the median annual income was $33, 321 per African American household while the median annual income per national household was $51, 017 (Census Bureau, 2013). These amounts, combined with predicted growth, suggests that African American households not only enjoyed 35% less of the nation's annual wealth, but also suggests that the variance between the median annual income per African American household and the median annual income per national household will also increase. Similarly, Census Bureau (2014) data showed that 12,104,000, African American U.S. citizens lived in poverty in 2013. Although the national average poverty rate was 15% in 2013, the poverty rate among African American U.S. citizens was 27.2%, nearly doubling the

national average poverty rate (Census Bureau, 2014). Jointly, these statistics suggest that the numbers of African American U.S. citizens living in poverty will also increase.

Moreover, at the time of this study, racial tensions between Black Americans and White Americans had resurfaced. The tensions resurfaced generally because of regressions in America's societal norms and values. These regressions involved the passage of certain laws in some states that inherently oppose civil rights legislation related to voting rights. They also stemmed from publicized incidents of the blatant disregard of White citizens for the lives and the safety of Black citizens, particularly in the deaths of unarmed Black men. Consequently, these contextual, cultural, and societal conditions may have influenced the participants or their experience at the time of this study; they may have also influenced my interpretation of the study results.

Participants' Demographics

Seven individuals participated in this study. I assigned them a pseudonym to ensure their complete confidentiality and privacy when I decided to include them in the study. I chose the pseudonym using the fruit of the Spirit found in Galatians 5:22-23 (KJV). In King James's Version of the Bible, the Apostle Paul described the fruit of the Spirit as personological virtues that emerge from Christians' relationships with God; the fruit of the Spirit distinguish Christians from non-Christians (Galatians 5:1-21), but there was no connection between the participants' pseudonyms and their personal characteristics or demographics information. I assigned the pseudonyms based on the order in which I selected participants to be included in the study. Tables 2, 3, and 4 display the participants' demographics relevant to this study.

Table 2

Participants' Demographics

Pseudonym	Preferred Ethnic-Identity	Gender	Age	Region	Year Degree Conferred	Specialty Area
Faith	B	F	52	NE	2014	Clinc
Forbearance	B	F	49	MW	2014	Gen
Good	AA	F	40	NE	2013	I/O
Joy	AA	F	36	SE	2013	Edu
Kind	AA/B	F	38	SE	2013	I/O
Love	B	M	54	NE	2014	I/O
Peace	B	F	50	NE	2014	I/O

Note. AA = African American, B = Black; F = female, M = male; MW = lives in the mid-western region of United States, NE = lives in the northeastern region of United States, SE = lives in the southeastern region of United States; Clinc = clinical psychology, Edu = educational psychology, Gen = general psychology, I/O = industrial and organizational psychology.

Most participants preferred to self-identify as Black. The majority was female, and Love was the only male participant. Love also was the oldest among the participants, and Joy was the youngest participant. The participants were between 36- and 54-years-old.Most participants' age suggests they were nontraditional students who were born either before, during, or after the time Civil Rights Act (1964) was added to legislation.

Most participants lived in the northeastern region of the United States. Most attained their doctorate in 2014, and most had attained their doctorate in industrial and organizational psychology. The majority had not attained an undergraduate degree in psychology when they entered their doctoral programs. More had attained a graduate degree in psychology when they entered their doctoral psychology programs, and two had attained an undergraduate and a graduate degree in psychology when they entered their doctoral psychology programs.

The participants had finished their degrees at two of the four FPCUs that I mentioned in Chapter 2. I labeled the FPCUs as FPCU 1 and FPCU 2 to protect their privacy. However, the majority of participants attained their doctorate from FPCU 2. All alluded to having student loan debt, including Love even though his employer had paid $140, 000 of his tuition. All indicated that attaining an education was important.

Data Collection

Seven Black doctorate recipients who attained a conferred doctorate in psychology from an FPCU between 2013 and 2014 provided data for the current study. I collected data via one 60- to 90-minute telephone interview with each participant, using the interview protocol in Appendix C. I conducted the interviews at the convenience of each participant from December 7 to December 30, 2014.

I recorded data pertaining to the first research question from the participants' responses to questions one through nine in the protocol and recorded data pertaining to the second research question from their responses to Questions 10 through 11. Combing these, I recorded data pertaining to the central research question. I recorded each participant's interview using a digital audio recorder. I later transcribed and stored the information in computer files.

I had planned to collect data from a sample of 10 to 12 participants. After assessing my recruitment efforts several weeks into recruiting participants, I found it necessary to obtain IRB approval to decrease the sample size to six to eight participants. In addition, from results of hermeneutical analysis, I determined that there was a need to

make changes to the interview protocol after the first two interviews. I rearranged the original questions and reworded some questions after the IRB approved the change.

The majority of participants were female. The majority of participants also had attained their doctorates from one FPCU. Most had attained their doctorates in industrial and organizational psychology.

Researcher's Epoché

I entered this study aware that some people devalue FPCUs, claiming that these institutions are degree mills that sell degrees to consumers of education. I also am aware that some people perceive that mentorship at FPCUs is insufficient, resulting in incompetent doctorate recipients. Although I believe that such allegations may be true for some FPCUs and for some FPCU doctorate recipients, I also believe that the allegations may not be true of all of them. As an Black student en route to attaining a doctorate in psychology at an FPCU, I entered this study disturbed about the repercussions these allegations may have on postdoctorate employment opportunities for me and other African American student loan borrowers who attain a doctorate in psychology from an FPCU.

I continue to believe that U.S. citizens and officials have made remarkable progress combating issues of racial discrimination and racism. However, recent events (i.e., the deaths of unarmed African American men and some state legislators' passage of voting legislation that suppress the voting rights of mostly ethnic minority U.S. citizens living in these states) indicated that these issues continue to plague American society.

These issues generally stifle African American citizens' autonomy and self-actualization. They continue to shape African American citizens' realities.

It is likely that my background experiences as a Black student at an FPCU, my knowledge of past and current struggles for African American people as well as African American cultural norms influenced my attitudes, beliefs, and values about online education and online doctoral psychology programs offered by FPCUs in general. I took care to ensure that the participants' personal stories emerged. I, admittedly, I chose to use a framework that illuminates the participants' strength and the practices of FPCUs to counter current literature on Black students and on the effectiveness of online doctoral psychology programs offered by FPCUs.

Data Analysis

I applied Moustakas's (1994) modifications of van Kaam and Giorgi's inductive data analysis steps to each transcript of the participants' responses to questions in the interview protocol. I read data transcribed from each participant's interview, highlighting the words, phrases, and passages addressing the research questions and numbering them as 1, 2, 3, and so on. Listening for the voices of the participants, I reread each transcript, comparing the codes and noting information about essential words, phrases, and passages in a journal (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Ensuring the accuracy of the identifying statements, I then compared and highlighted the themes. These steps were necessary for completing the first step of Moustakas's modifications of van Kaam and Giorgi's data analysis steps: equally labeling all statements.

Carrying out the second step, I sorted, prioritized, and labeled equally numerated words, phrases, and passages. Next, I clustered them into categories (e.g., assessing, initiating, and locating) as they related to the research question they addressed, grouping them according to their relationship, which was the common factor. Completing the fourth and final step of the data analysis process, I reduced the themes according to their relationships. I kept the ones that were compatible and explicable, and I deleted the ones that were not.

I did not use any discrepant cases in this study. These steps were necessary for me to understand (a) everything that the participants experienced and (b) in what way they experienced the phenomenon. Using the SDL theoretical foundation and the culture contextual lens as described in Chapter 2 and information obtained in the literature reviewed on the topic, the following themes emerged:

Theme 1: Selecting an FPCU,

Theme 2: Selecting a Specialty Area,

Theme 3: Negotiating Transfer Credits,

Theme 4: Completing the Doctoral Coursework Phase,

Theme 5: Completing the Dissertation Phase,

Theme 6: Cultural Knowledge, and

Theme 7: Self-Actualization.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

To ensure the study's credibility, I followed the plan noted in Chapter 3. I used member checks to maximize the confidence in what I stated I had learned and had discovered in the findings of this study (Moustakas, 1994; Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). When conducting member checks, I e-mailed the participants a brief summary (three to four pages) of my understanding of their interview information, approximately 7 to 10 days after their interviews; I asked each participant to review the information to ensure the accuracy of my understanding. Most of the participants confirmed that my interpretation of their information was accurate, and two added pertinent information or clarified a couple of misinterpretations of pertinent information.

Transferability

I also employed the plan stated in Chapter 3 to maximize the study's transferability. I used maximum variation and rich thick descriptions to maximize the degree to which my findings can be applicable to others (Moustakas, 1994; Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). I included seven Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees between 2013 and 2014 from two FPCUs offering online doctoral psychology programs.

The individuals were within varying age groups and lived in various regions within the United States. They finished their degrees in various specialty areas such as clinical psychology, educational psychology, general psychology, and industrial and organizational psychology. They used a variety of research methodologies: qualitative,

quantitative, and true experiment, with an intervention. These individuals formed a unique-criterion-purposive sample.

I uncovered prevalent features, dimensions, and themes. I documented an array of differences and capitalized on individual and institutional differences and similarities. Variations in each FPCU's doctoral psychology program curriculum and key people involved in the participants' dissertation experience allowed me to gain insights into their overall online doctoral education experience at the FPCU. I included rich, thick data.

These data contained the exact words of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees in the various specialty areas from two FPCUs that describe their experience of finishing their programs and the factors that contributed to them finishing their degrees. From selected quotes from the participants, I illuminated the developing themes and offered in-depth background descriptions. The rich descriptions of the phenomenon allow others to transfer findings.

Dependability

To maximize the study's dependability, I followed the plan stated in Chapter 3. I consulted with my dissertation committee and an outside qualitative research expert to maximize the extent that the findings were consistent and the extent to which others may replicate the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nastasi & Schensul, 2005). I consulted with them when I developed the questions for the interview protocol. They ensured that my processes and questions aligned with the methods of phenomenological research. I used the information provided from the consultations to develop the open-ended questions contained in my interview protocol.

I also used reflexive journaling to maximize the study's dependability. Through reflexive journaling, I observed my own personal feelings, impressions, and thoughts as these emerged when I designed the research study, and while I performed data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation activities (Nastasi & Schensul, 2005). In collecting these observations, I determined "what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified" (Creswell, 2013, p. 21), relative to the epistemological assumptions, adding depth of meaning to the interviews (Moustakas, 1994; Nastasi & Schensul, 2005).

Confirmability

I followed the plan in Chapter 3 to maximize the study's confirmability. I used reflexivity as a strategy to maximize the internal consistency of the data, findings, elucidations, and recommendations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nastasi & Schensul, 2005). I positioned myself in the writings to prevent my subjective bias from obscuring my objectivity. In Chapter 1 and in the epoché, I acknowledged my experiences as a Black online doctoral psychology student at an FPCU as well as acknowledged the bias, experiences, and values that I brought into the study (Creswell, 2013). I also recognized how these might have plausibly shaped the findings, conclusions, and interpretations depicted in the study.

Results

I derived at the findings of this study from carefully coding and analyzing the data. The findings included the lived experiences of seven Black students. The findings specifically focus on their experience of completing an online doctoral psychology

program at an FPCU and the factors contributing to these students finishing their degrees at an FPCU.

What is the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who finished an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU was the central question I sought to answer. What is the lived experience of Black students who completed an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU, and what are the factors that contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees at an FPCU were subquestions. I present the findings according to the themes.

Theme 1: Selecting an FPCU

In this theme, the participants talked about what led them to enroll at their particular FPCUs and what the FPCUs required for admission. Their stories emphasized the importance of the option of having the online learning approach available. They generally agreed that the structure of the FPCUs were beneficial, and they said it allowed them "accessibility" and "flexibility" in finishing their doctorates. These also were significant factors for why several participants said they "would recommend attaining a doctorate from an online program" to people they know. Love also said that he would recommend attaining a doctorate online specifically because of the open admission policy that "allows students to enter a doctoral psychology program even if their undergraduate and graduate education is not in psychology."

The majority of participants said that the FPCUs' approach to learning was suitable because it accommodated their lifestyles and their learning needs. Forbearance was divorced. Forbearance and Kind were "single mothers," raising school-aged children.

Joy had two young "daughters" and had "given birth to the youngest" one while she was pursuing her doctorate.

Faith, Good, Joy, and Peace were "married." The comments that Love made during the interview suggested that Love had at least one adult "son," and that Love may have been divorced. Unlike the other participants, Faith and Good did not mention having children. Good did mention that her "husband was also pursuing a doctorate at the same FPCU."

Study participants also discussed their reasons for choosing their particular FPCUs over the other ones. All participants conducted preliminary research on the FPCUs before they decided to enroll. They emphasized particular information about the FPCUs that they believed was important.

Love was the only participant indicating that the open admissions policies had influenced his decision to enroll at his chosen FPCU. Love stated, "I had attained a 3.0, above a 3.0 GPA, when I was at the [institution's name omitted], studying my master's degree, I met the criteria." Kind was the only participant expressing relief about not having to "restudy" and "retake the GRE" in order to enroll in the FPCU. Kind said:

> It was after speaking with some of the students at institutions like the University of [state's name omitted] and University of [stat's name omitted] where they have industrial and organizational psychology programs. I found out that the requirements to enter into the program were very, very high, and they only allowed so many students into the program once a year. I didn't want to have to

> retake the GRE, not if I didn't have to. If I wanted to attend either one of those institutions, I definitely would have had to study and retake the GRE.

Kind also was the only participant suggesting that the FPCU's ability to provide racial anonymity had some influence on her decision to enroll there. Discussing belonging uncertainty and stereotype threat, Kind said, "[the racial anonymity of learning online] was a great deal why I tried to look for another program that was totally online." These were not the primary reasons Kind said that she selected her particular FPCU.

Forbearance and Kind's experiences with selecting their FPCUs were similar, but their reasons for selecting their particular FPCUs were different. Kind said:

> I did apply at the University of [state's name omitted], but I was not admitted into the program. They told me I did not have a strong enough background in psychology. I looked at [public institution's name omitted]. I looked at institutions like [FPCU's name omitted] and [FPCU's name omitted], and there was another one. It was a public university offering the program online, similar to what I done at [public institution's name omitted], but at [FPCU's name omitted] everything seemed to be laid out plain and clear.

Unlike Kind, Forbearance said that the TCUs in her area were only offering the Psy.D credential. Forbearance said, "I really did not want a Psy.D. People thought less of people with a Psy.D." Forbearance mentioned that when researching schools offering the Ph.D. psychology credential, she found her chosen FPCU. Forbearance said that she "requested information" and "spoke with an admissions advisor several months" before she said "yes to the program."

Faith, unlike theses participants, said that she chose her particular FPCU after she investigated the FPCU's "accreditation." Describing what led her to enroll at that particular FPCU, Faith stated, "We checked the schools, and [FPCU's name omitted] was the best rating school than the others, based on accreditation." In contrast to the other participants, Kind and Peace said they also focused on the reviews the FPCUs had received.

However, Peace added, "The thing that really sealed my decision for [FPCU's name omitted] was the fact that there were many students working for the federal government, so I never investigated the other colleges." Peace, unlike the other participants, said that she also considered the "number of students transferring from other schools" to her chosen FPCU. Peace also said that she had met a several "successful" people in her state who had attended the FPCU.

In addition, Peace and Joy, contrasting the other participants, said that individuals who had attended, were attending, and or were working at their chosen FPCUs recommended that they pursue their doctorates at the FPCUs. However, Joy, added, "I think online programs are going to be much more standard, now . . . . Online learners are more disciplined and more focused," and Joy added, "We have to be very independent-type learners, so I think you get a person who is independent . . ., who thinks outside the box." Joy concluded "I think going to an online university is a different way of thinking; a different way of learning, but it's progressive. It's cutting edge."

Unlike like the other participants, Good was the only participant that transferred from a TCU. Explaining why she chose to transfer, Good said, "I transferred to [FPCU's

name omitted] because I wanted to change my specialization area to organizational psychology. My program didn't have organizational psychology. The other reason I transferred is that I've faced challenges with forming a dissertation committee."

In short, in this theme, the participants described what led them to enroll at their particular FPCUs. All participants said that conducted preliminary research on the FPCUs before they made their selection. Several focused on specific information regarding the FPCUs such as the FPCUs' "accreditation," "program offerings," and reputation; two participants focused on the FPCUs' open admissions requirements, and one emphasized the "racial anonymity" that online learning provides. Participants generally agreed that the structure of the FPCUs were beneficial because it allowed them "accessibility" and "flexibility" in finishing their doctorates. These also were significant factors for why several participants said they "would recommend attaining a doctorate from an online program" to people they know.

Theme 2: Selecting a Specialty Area

In this theme, study participants talked about their specialty areas. Many mentioned that they had always been interested in psychology. They also said that they had explored other disciplines such as "adult education," "arts," "business," and "political science" before discovering that "psychology" was their "passion."

Most chose to attain a doctorate in "industrial and organizational psychology." The remaining participants chose to attain a doctorate in "clinical psychology," "educational psychology," and "general psychology." Most generally agreed that their "career plans related to their pursuing a doctorate in psychology."

Study participants explored the reasons for choosing their particular specialty area. Faith and Joy's reasons for choosing to pursue a doctorate in their particular specialty areas were similar. Faith's reason for choosing to specialize in clinical psychology was that she wanted credentials that would enable her to "plan the care for children in the [welfare] system." Similarly, Joy's reason for choosing to specialize in educational psychology was that she wanted credentials that would enable her to help students and to help school administrators. Specially, Joy said,

> Well once I got my bachelor's in political science, I'd actually gone to law school for a semester. I realized it was not my passion. It wasn't anything that I was interested in, and I had no desire to do it for the rest of my life, so psychology was always a love, and something I've always enjoyed and wanted to do. I knew I didn't want to be a teacher, so I researched psychology. I researched counseling. I thought about being a school counselor, and then I started researching school psychology. It seemed like a perfect fit for me, being able to work with students, but helping students through their learning difficulties; helping administrators, and that's how I fell into it.

Forbearance said she chose to specialize in general psychology "to get more knowledge on psychology and to do more consultation work." In contrast to Joy, Forbearance perceived that educational psychology was too "restricted." Forbearance said, "I do want to do research. That's a big emphasis for me, as well as consulting and teaching. I wanted to go more general and look at more of the side of research."

Similar to Joy, Peace said she "always wanted to be a psychologist, but not a clinical psychologist." Peace said after completing her undergraduate degree and actually "doing social and organizational psychology," she realized that her "strength was in administration." Peace also said that, at this time, she determined she wanted to work with nonprofits, and Peace's desire to work with nonprofit organizations was the reason she attained her "first" graduate degree in "public administration." Peace decided to specialize in industrial and organizational psychology, and Peace added, "Psychology at work is still where my interest lies: Why do people behave the way they do at work."

Kind also decided to specialize in industrial and organizational psychology. Unlike Peace, Kind's interest was not in understanding the reasons behind people's work behavior. Viewing herself as a "mother hen," Kind said that her interest was to help people be more efficient in their jobs. Kind stated, "So I guess that focuses on efficiency, and being knowledgeable enough to do your job and always looking to be better."

Although Good also chose to specialize in industrial and organizational psychology, Good said, "I have an interest in tests and measurements and psychometrics." Similarly, Love chose to specialize in industrial and organizational psychology. In contrast, Love's reason for choosing this particular area was different. Love said,

> I chose to study industrial and organizational psychology even though my passion is cognitive psychology. I worked at an industrial organization, and I was anticipating my employer to pay for the courses. I chose something that was more likely to meet the needs of the organization as well as meet my needs.

This theme emerged from study participants' discussions of why they selected their particular specialty areas. Many mentioned that they had always been interested in psychology even though they had explored other disciplines such as "adult education," "arts," "business," and "political science" before discovering that "psychology" was their "passion." Four participants chose "industrial and organizational psychology" for their specialty area, but the remaining participants chose "clinical psychology," "educational psychology," and "general psychology" for their specialty areas. They talked about particular aspects of these domains that piqued their interests; most generally agreed that their "career plans related to their pursuing a doctorate in psychology."

Theme 3: Negotiating Transfer Credits

Study participants talked openly about the FPCUs' requirements for completing their doctoral psychology programs in this cluster. This theme emerged as many participants emphasized the number of transfer credits the FPCUs accepted from their previous programs. Some focused on the number of credits their FPCUs accepted from their other programs, emphasizing that they were exempt from having to take because of their negotiation of the transfer credits. Some focused on how these were particularly influential on their selecting their particular FPCUs. Table 3 provides information about participants, transfer credits, and time spent in coursework.

Table 3

Participants, Transfer Credits, and Time in Coursework Phase

Pseudonym	Transferred Credits	Time in Coursework
Faith	No	36 months
Forbearance	Yes	36 months
Good	Yes	36 months
Joy	Yes	20 months
Kind	Yes	36 months
Love	No	48 months
Peace	Yes	48 months

Data in Table 3 indicate that only two participants did not have transfer credit. All participants who attained a graduate degree in psychology said they were able transfer some credits they had earned from these programs. The more credits they were able to transfer reduced the amount of courses they needed to take. Several participants emphasized the credits the FPCUs accepted from their previous programs. Describing the negotiation of her transfer credits, Good asserted,

> When I contacted [FPCU's name omitted], the enrollment advisor was just friendly, and then, I had so much transfer credit. She committed to helping me get the maximum, so because I was able to get the transfer maximum, and they were able to do it quickly.

Forbearance, Joy, and Peace agreed with Good, and they all had transfer credits. These participants had attained their graduate degrees in psychology. Joy said, "I know that they took several of my courses. I want to say they took like five of my courses from my master's [degree]." Joy added, "I started the doctoral program three years after I completed my master's, so they took several courses." Forbearance also said that her chosen FPCU allowed her to "transfer some credits" from her graduate psychology

program. In contrast, Forbearance did not emphasize transfer credits as the other participants had emphasized them.

Faith, Kind, and Love had not attained a graduate or an undergraduate degree in psychology. Theoretically, they would not have credits to transfer to their online doctoral psychology programs. Kind was the only participant among these participants to have some of her previous credits transferred. Regarding how she was able to negotiate transfer credits, Kind said,

> I remember there were questions that were similar to what they [the FPCU] offered in the I/O because they covered training and development, and my master's was in adult education, which incorporated or entailed training. They were related although my master's was not in psychology: They still overlapped. I think what may have been the seller for me was the fact that they were willing to transfer in quite a few number of credit hours from my master's [program]. I think I was able to transfer in 20 hours.

Generally, study participants acknowledged that the FPCUs required them to "complete coursework and electives." However, the number of transfer credits the FPCU accepted from their previous programs determined the number of courses the participants were required to take. Peace said, "One other thing, they [the FPCU] helped me to finish a little quicker." Peace added, "They accepted the classes I had done [in her graduate programs], and that exempted me from some of the classes I had to do, so that was a plus for me." The transferred credits also determined which courses the participants would be exempt from having to take.

The participants also acknowledged that the FPCUs required them to "attend colloquia/residencies." The colloquia/residencies consisted of "4- to 6-day face-to-face meetings with the FPCUs' faculty" at a specified location. These meetings focused on helping study participants to prepare for their dissertation capstone research studies.

The participants' experiences at the colloquia/residencies varied. However, Good, Joy, Love, and Peace mentioned that they "found" their "dissertation chairs while attending a residency." Peace said that she "presented her dissertation topic at a residency."

Faith was in the clinical psychology program, and because Faith chose the clinical psychology specialty, her chosen FPCU required her "to complete an internship." The internship consisted of "onsite practicums" at an agency of her choice. Another difference in the participants' experiences emerged from differences in the FPCUs' program requirements. Unlike participants who attained their degrees from FPCU 2, participants who attained their degrees from FPCU 1 said after they "completed all of the coursework," they also "had to pass a comprehensive exam."

In short, study participants talked openly about the FPCUs' requirements for completing their doctoral psychology programs in this cluster. All participants acknowledged that the FPCUs "required" them to complete coursework and electives as well as "required" them to attend periodic "colloquia/residencies" that consisted of several days of "face-to-face meeting with the FPCUs' faculty" to "prepare them for their dissertation capstones." Four participants said they "found" their "dissertation chairs/mentors" while attending a "colloquia/residency," but only one participant said she

"presented her dissertation topic at a residency." In contrast, the two participants who attended FPCU 1 were "required to pass a comprehensive exam after they "completed all of the coursework." One participant in the clinical psychology program was also "required to complete an internship."

This theme emerged as many participants emphasized the number of transfer credits the FPCUs accepted from their previous programs. Table 3 provides information about participants, transfer credits, and time spent in coursework. Four participants had attained their graduate degrees in psychology, and the majority of them emphasized their transfer credits, which they related to their enrollment decision or their being exempt from some course. Three participants had not attained their graduate degrees in psychology. Among these three, one was able to transfer credits because her FPCU related some courses from her graduate degree program to her chosen specialty area.

Theme 4: Completing the Doctoral Coursework Phase

In this cluster, the participants talked about what they did to complete their programs. They discussed their anticipation and preparation for the dissertation. They discussed what they understood the dissertation to be. They talked about when they arrived at their dissertation. They also specified what features of the program requirements were the most influential in helping them to prepare for the dissertation.

Table 3 indicated that the time the participants had spent completing coursework ranged from 20 months to 48 months. Faith, Forbearance, Good, and Kind spent 36 months completing the doctoral coursework phase of their programs. Joy spent lesser time completing this phase of the educational psychology program; Joy only spent 20

months in this phase. Love and Peace spent the most time completing this phase of their programs; they spent 48 months completing coursework. Both were also in an industrial and organizational psychology program.

Joy and Peace, unlike Love, said they had attained a graduate degree in psychology when they entered their doctoral programs. Both also negotiated transfer credits. However, even though their educational backgrounds were similar. They chose different specialty areas. They also attended different FPCUs. Even though Love and Peace spent the same amount of time completing the doctoral coursework phase and chose the same specialty area, they attended different FPCUs. Joy and Love attended the same FPCU.

Even though Good and Peace attained an undergraduate and a graduate degree in psychology, Joy spent lesser time completing the doctoral coursework phase of her program. Good and Joy had completed their graduate degrees at HBCUs. Joy, as previously noted, was the youngest participant in the sample, and Joy attained her doctorate in 2013. Joy and Peace had at least one parent and had siblings who had attained graduate degrees, but Peace's "mom was a Ph.D."

Love and Peace were around the same age, and both attained their doctorates in 2014. Love, unlike Joy and Peace, was the "first" in his family "to attend college." Love was the "first person" from his "low-income neighborhood to attain a Ph.D." Love, as previously mentioned, also was the oldest participant in the sample. When describing the program requirements for his chosen FPCU, Love remarked:

> There was another requirement that I came to understand towards the end. I misinterpreted the start and beginning, in terms of how many years. Eight years is actually the accumulation of years from the time that you started. Which means that when you come into the school, four years of your time, if you had no previous courses to substitute, the first four years were actually coursework, and then once [you] finish your coursework, you transition right into the dissertation phase, so that together equals eight years. I had to request an extension that lasted until [month and year omitted] because I had exceeded the eight-year time.

Participants also discussed their perceptions of the dissertation while they were completing the doctoral coursework phase of their programs. Generally, Faith, Forbearance, Good, Love, and Peace's perceptions of the dissertation were similar. They indicated that they understood that it would consist of writing five chapters on a topic. Good said, "I knew that it would be five chapters, and that it had to be a study that nobody has ever conducted before; that it had to be grounded in a theoretical framework."

Similar to Good, Joy said, "My understanding was that it was going to be a process. We're going to have the prospectus, your proposal: collecting your research . . . . I was going to be writing five chapters on a subject that I was interested in." Joy added, "I roughly knew that I was going to have to find a chair, and I was going to have two committee members."

Peace said that she understood that the dissertation would entail some research. Peace said her "mom's" insight helped her to know what to expect at the dissertation

phase. Because Peace's "mom was a Ph.D.," she "expected and knew that the dissertation meant a lot of research."

Love agreed with the other participants. Love said, "My conception of it was that, again, it was a learning process. In the process are doors or steps in which you have to go through: step one; door one, two, three, and so on." Love also said, "The only thing that rattled my concept of the developmental process of Chapter 1, Chapter 2, Chapter 3, and Chapter 4 was that you can either look at it as absolute, or you can look at it is being flexible." However, Love added, "meaning that some of the books that teach you how to write are very cut and dry."

In contrast, Faith said, "I actually didn't know much about it. All I knew is that we were supposed to cover certain information." Joy agreed, and added, "Some of the other parts, you know, I learned going through it because I, obviously, didn't delve deeply into it because I just didn't want to overwhelm myself." However, Kind's conception of the dissertation was unique. Kind described how she conceived the dissertation as follows:

> To prepare me to do independent research; so instead of me doing all the reading and having to explain to somebody else what it meant, I was now going to be the one conducting the experiment. I was now going to be the one doing the research, to compile necessary scholarly information or literature review for my study. So it was spirited the practical side of all this stuff that I had learned in the prior three years.

Generally, when the participants arrived at their dissertation topics were similar. Forbearance, Joy, Love, and Peace said they had decided on their topic "while completing the dissertation coursework phase." They also said they had linked their coursework assignments to their dissertation topic. They agreed that identifying a dissertation topic during the doctoral coursework phase was important. They also agreed that linking their doctoral coursework assignments to their dissertation "saved them some time" during the dissertation phase.

Forbearance, Joy, Love, and Peace said that they linked their coursework to their dissertation topic. Forbearance explained, "That's what all my papers were written on, [psychological construct omitted] in [population omitted]." Even though Joy said she didn't want to "overwhelm" herself by "delv[ing] deeply into it," Joy agreed with Forbearance. Joy specially, said, "At the time, as much as I was doing the coursework, every single paper that I was writing for my classes, I was actually using those papers and those ideas to get closer to what I wanted to do." Love also talked about linking his coursework assignments to his dissertation topic, but Love said, "I took courses that would connect together to provide me [with] the resources that I needed when I entered into my Ph.D. portion of my education."

Peace also said that she began thinking about the dissertation, "in the back of her mind," while she was completing the doctoral coursework phase of her industrial and organizational psychology program. Describing her experience, Peace said, "From the time I started in the classes, I started, in the back of my mind, kind of thinking about what I want to study." Peace also said that her "mom" and her "professors suggested" that she

"save [her] research from [her] coursework," and Peace added, "I saved my research from my class because I might [have] need[ed] it. So I think going into the dissertation, I was pretty well prepared."

Only Forbearance said that by the time she reached the dissertation phase, the topic she had been researching while completing the doctoral coursework phase, was "exhausted." This meant she had to find another topic. On the contrary, Good and Kind said they did not think about their dissertation topic while completing the doctoral coursework phase of their programs. Good said, "I had received advice from one faculty member as an undergraduate to decide on my topic even before I entered a Ph.D. program."

Unlike the participants who had a dissertation topic in mind and linked their doctoral coursework assignments to their topics, Good added, "But I didn't understand. I didn't understand how you can [could] do that, so I didn't do that." Agreeing with Good, Kind said, "I didn't do that." Kind added, "I mean I was all over the place, and yes by the time I finished my coursework, I didn't have a lot of research compiled by others that could easily be delved into by Chapter 2, the literature review."

Kind and Peace chose the same specialty area, and they attended the same FPCU. Unlike Peace, Kind said that when she was completing the doctoral coursework phase, "the professors were not suggesting that students link their coursework to their dissertation" capstones. Kind also said, "The professors they were not encouraging students to begin developing or thinking about their topics for the dissertation" capstone, which she said, "the FPCU is now doing." Even though Joy attended a different FPCU,

chose a different specialty area, and linked her coursework assignments to her dissertation topic, Joy agreed with Kind. Joy said, “Professors were not encouraging students to begin developing or thinking about their topics for the dissertation” capstone or “suggesting that students link their coursework to their dissertations.”

The participants also discussed aspects of the program requirements that were the most influential in helping them to prepare for the dissertation. The majority of participants perceived that completing the FPCU’s requirements for the doctoral coursework phase had “prepared them for the dissertation well.” Kind rated how well her FPCU’s requirements prepared her for the dissertation. Kind said, “I think the program did well. If I had to . . . , on a scale of 0-10, with 10 being the highest, I would probably give them about an eight-and- a half to a nine, out of 10.” Kind said that the reason for the deduction is that, in her opinion, the curriculum was set up to have students to define and to develop their dissertation topics too late in the program.

Peace agreed with Kind regarding her FPCU’s program requirements preparing her for the dissertation “well.” Peace also perceived that “everything the FPCU required” for completing the doctoral coursework phase helped to prepare her for the dissertation. Peace perceived that “the core courses, the projects, the statistics course, and the writing prepared” her “well.” Peace added, “Another thing that we had at [FPCU’s name omitted] was this writing summer class, but it was to support your writing, and so that, too, was very helpful with the dissertation.”

Not all participants perceived that completing the FPCU’s requirements for the doctoral coursework phase prepared them for the dissertation well. Faith preferred not to

comment on the interview question. This suggested that Faith did not perceive that the doctoral coursework phase prepared her for the dissertation well. Agreeing with Faith, Good also perceived otherwise, and similar to Kind, Good rated how well their FPCU's requirements prepared her for the dissertation. However, Good offered a global rating. Good specifically said:

> I would say on a scale of 1 to 10, where one [means] the program requirements not prepared me well and 10 [means] extremely well, I would say maybe a 2. That seems low, but let me adjust, maybe three. That seems low, but I don't think that that's a [FPCU's name omitted] issue. I just think that's a Ph.D. issue because the skillset you need to, successfully, complete a dissertation only overlap a little bit with the skillset you need to successfully complete doctoral coursework. So I don't think [FPCU's name omitted] is not so great at that, but I think the vast majority of Ph.D. programs are not so great at that. So I'm not singling [FPCU's name omitted] out. I think they are right in line with their counterparts. The reason that I finished was not because of the curriculum.

Unlike Good and similar to Kind and Peace, Love perceived that all of his FPCU's requirements for completing the doctoral coursework phase prepared him for the dissertation well. Love added, "They prepared me for the way that I framed my focus. My focus was on x, y, and z, so anything outside of that focus, I heard. I was always flexible within that x, y, z, but it had to stay within that." Kind, Peace, Good, and Love chose the same specialty area, industrial and organizational psychology. In contrast, Love and Good attended the same FPCU, and Good and Kind attained their doctorates in 2013.

Several participants provided specific examples of how completing the FPCU's program requirements were beneficial for them. Although Joy was in the educational psychology program, she agreed with everyone except Good. Joy also perceived that the program requirements "prepared [her] for the dissertation well." Describing how completing her FPCU's requirements for the doctoral coursework phase of the program helped to prepare her for the dissertation, Joy added:

> At best, the coursework prepared me for the writing. In the dissertation, you're doing a lot of research . . . , research to writing. You're doing a lot of research and a lot of writing in my [your] courses. You know, you're constantly writing, doing posts, and you got papers to write, so I feel like that prepared me. The coursework required me to be scholarly, to research scholarly, [and] to write scholarly, which prepared me for the dissertation. That, I think, was huge because by the time I got to the dissertation, writing 20 pages here or there was nothing, 'cause I've been doing it for two years before that. My residencies, I guess, were a time where I could connect with other people, face-to-face, who were going through what I was going through, so that was nice. I remember the residencies and even the courses and seminars where they were talking about the dissertation. But I think I really wished that some of the courses would have better prepared me or would have put me in a position where parts of my dissertation would have already been completed and knocked out [finished] to get me moving faster.

Forbearance also agreed with all the other participants, with the exception of Good. Forbearance perceived that her FPCU's requirements for the doctoral coursework

phase prepared her for the dissertation well. Even though Forbearance chose the general psychology specialty, similar to Joy, Forbearance also perceived that the writing assignments she was required to complete during the doctoral coursework phase "empowered" her to become a more "scholarly" writer. Forbearance specifically said, "I think all the papers I've written, over my three years of coursework, really empowered me. I think I learned how to write scholarly." Forbearance and Joy attended the same FPCU as Good and Love. In contrast, Forbearance attained her doctorate in 2014 while Joy attained her doctorate in 2013.

In short, in this cluster, the participants talked about what they did to complete their programs. They discussed their anticipation and preparation for the dissertation. They discussed what they understood the dissertation to be. They talked about when they arrived at their dissertation. They also specified what features of the program requirements were the most influential in helping them to prepare for the dissertation.

Many participants spent 36 months completing the doctoral coursework phase of their programs, including participants who did and did not have transfer credits. The majority of participants said that, at the doctoral coursework phase, they knew they would have to write five chapters for the dissertation. One participant said she did not know what it was about, and one said it was set up as the" practical side" of the program that places the student in the role of the researcher. Many participants said that they arrived at their dissertation topics while completing the doctoral coursework phase.

Many participants had linked their coursework assignments to their dissertation topics, and one said that by the time she reached the dissertation phase, the topic had been

"exhausted." One said she did not know how to do this, and one said she was "all over the place" while completing the doctoral coursework phase, and therefore, did not link have her dissertation topic in place. All but one participant perceived that the FPCUs' requirements for completing the doctoral coursework phase of their programs "prepared" them "well" for the dissertation, and two mentioned that it would have been more effective if the FPCUs were emphasizing that students prepare their dissertation topics earlier in the program, encouraging students to link their coursework assignments to said topics.

Theme 5: Completing the Dissertation Phase

In this theme, the participants talked about their experiences with completing the dissertation phase of their programs. They talked about what they did in order to complete their dissertation, including their experiences after they reached ABD status, their relationships with their dissertation chairs/mentors, and their dissertation topics and methods. They also discussed how they felt as a Black student who was pursuing a field that non-Black individuals have historically dominated at an institution characterized by high student attrition and low graduation rates. They also assessed their satisfaction with the outcome relative to what they had expected when they entered the doctoral psychology program at their chosen FPCU and to what they had experienced.

All participants acknowledged that finishing their degrees at in an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU was challenging. Generally, they acknowledged that completing an online doctoral psychology program using the FPCU learning approach required more discipline and more self-direction compared to what they had experienced

when they used the traditional face-to-face learning approach. The FPCUs' instructional methods for the dissertation were different. FPCU 1 used the scientific merit review statistics solutions manuals (SMR). FPCU 2 used a dissertation checklist. The majority of participants attended FPCU 2.

The majority of participants indicated that they thought that they had a "good understanding" of their FPCU's requirements for completing the dissertation. The descriptions of the participants' experiences from the time they reached ABD status to obtaining final approval of their final study varied. Table 4 displays additional information about the participants, including the time they spent completing the dissertation phase. It displays information about their research focus, and it displays information about their research method and the number of years it took them to complete their programs.

Table 4

Participants, Time in Dissertation, Research Focus, Research Method, and Years in Program

Pseudonym	Time in Dissertation	Research Related to AA-Related Issues	Research Method	Years to Complete Program
Faith	48 months	Yes	Quantitative	7
Forbearance	36 months	No	Qualitative	6
Good	54 months	No	True Experiment	7.5
Joy	48 months	Yes	Qualitative	6
Kind	24 months	No	Quantitative	5
Love	72 months	No	Quantitative	10
Peace	18 months	No	Qualitative	5.5

Data in Table 4 indicate that the time participants spent completing the dissertation ranged from 18 months to 72 months. Peace spent lesser time completing the

dissertation when compared to the other participants. Peace spent 18 months completing the dissertation. Kind spent 24 months completing the dissertation.

Although Forbearance and Peace's educational backgrounds were in psychology, unlike Kind's educational background, Forbearance spent 36 months completing the dissertation. Similarly, Faith's educational background was not in psychology. Faith did not have credits transferred. However, Faith and Joy spent 48 months completing the dissertation.

In contrast, Joy explained, "I took a qualitative course because I knew I wanted to do qualitative research, but I took that as an elective, on purpose. That class really helped me because it required me to write Chapter 3." Joy said taking the qualitative analysis course was very helpful because she had her "research design all laid out, already written" for her dissertation. Neither Love nor Faith's educational backgrounds were in psychology. Although both participants did not have transfer credit, Love spent 72 months completing the dissertation.

The data indicated that the total time participants spent completing their programs requirements for degree attainment ranged from 5 to 10 years. Kind, when compared to the other participants whose educational backgrounds were in psychology, spent lesser time completing the industrial and organizational psychology program requirements at her FPCU. Even though Kind's educational background was not in psychology, she spent only 5 years completing the program requirements. In contrast, Love spent the most time completing the industrial and organizational psychology program requirements at his

FPCU when compared to the other participants; Love spent 10 years completing the program.

The findings indicated a notable difference in the time spent completing the program for the two participants who had attained an undergraduate and a graduate degree in psychology when they entered their programs. Good and Peace had attained both an undergraduate and a graduate degree in psychology when they entered their programs. Both were in the industrial and organizational psychology program and lived in the northeastern region of the United States.

In contrast, Good and Peace attained their degrees from different FPCUs. Good spent more time completing the program compared to the time Peace spent completing the program, but Good spent lesser time completing the doctoral coursework phase of the program. Unlike Peace, Good conducted an experiment with an intervention, and she was the "first" person in her family "to attend college." Peace was 12 years older than Good was. Unlike Good, Peace said that was common for her family members to have attained "at least a master's degree," and Peace's "mom" also "was a Ph.D."

The descriptions of their experiences from the time they reached ABD status to obtaining final approval of their final study also varied. Participants generally acknowledged that completing the dissertation phase entailed writing five chapters on their chosen topics. How participants experienced writing the chapters varied. Most participants provided detailed descriptions of what they did to complete the dissertation. Faith described what she did as follows:

> I did pretty much what everybody did. You go online . . . We research our topic. We write. We send in our writing when it is ready or whatever. We take it back, and we priori among . . . , with ourselves while we are rewriting, and we cry. We laugh sometimes, and we share our papers and whatever. We turn it over for a few minutes, days, weeks, or so until we [are] ready to look at it again. And we get up and over it, and we say, "you know what, this is what we want, and this is what we're going do. I [will] do my work, no matter what, and that's it!"

Kind, Love, and Peace's experiences were similar. Describing her experience with writing the chapters, Kind stated, "I followed the SMR. You have all of these questions, throughout, that you are answering, and it's meant to dump into what will become your first three chapters, so [I] did that. I cleaned it up; had someone editing." Kind also said she made changes based on her dissertation chair's feedback. Kind added, "Sometimes, I derailed [was unclear, focusing on too much information] a bit and had to bring it back in [be concise, focusing only her topic]. Sometimes, I had to go back [after discovering issues on her own] and change my wording and my hypothesis."

However, Peace said that she hated when her "mentor" sent her work back to her saying that she needed to make corrections, so she spent a lot of time ensuring that her work, in her mind, "was perfect." Peace stated that the FPCU's "IRB approved" her to conduct her research "relatively quickly." Peace said that once she "finished it," however, "writing her conclusion" took her "quite some time to complete," particularly "while making the charts." Peace added, "After it was approved, it was sent to [FPCU's name

omitted] editors for edit. After that, we did the final changes. We had the second conference call after all the chapters were approved."

Partially describing what he did to complete the dissertation, Love said, "I spent quite a bit of time studying the fullness of this history of the context that I was considering, so there I was in the pursuit of knowledge." Love said he did not have to do a lot "because I did a lot of that when I was completing coursework." Love said that from there, "I studied the database. I spent a whole quarter studying the database." Love added, "In the meantime, I was turning in, trying to turn in my writing to him [his dissertation chair], so he could get a grasp of what I was writing about and so forth."

Faith, Forbearance, Good, Joy, and Love said that they encountered a number of challenges completing the dissertation phase of their programs. The majority of these participants said they met several challenges completing the procedures their FPCU had in place for completing the dissertation. The types of challenges they experienced differed. They also said that they spent between 4 and 180 weeks working through these challenges. Love spent the most time working through his challenges, and Joy spent the least amount of time working through her challenges.

The challenges related to the participants' dissertation committees, research topics, and IRB applications. Faith, Forbearance, Good, and Love said they experienced challenges related to "forming" their "committees." As previously mentioned, these participants attended the same FPCU.

In contrast, they chose different specialty areas, and they attained their degrees at different times. Faith was in the clinical psychology, but Forbearance was in the general

psychology program. Good and Love were in the industrial and organizational psychology program. Faith, Forbearance, and Love attained their doctorates in 2014, but Good attained her doctorate in 2013.

Describing her challenges with forming her dissertation committee, Faith said she picked her chair because "nobody else was available. I said, 'you know what; I just got to work with him.' He wasn't knowledgeable about my topic. He told me that at that moment, but I couldn't get a chair. Nobody was available." Faith added, "Now, I will [would] write letters to like a million people [available faculty on the list provided by the FPCU]. I mean I got answers from quite a few, but 'nope they weren't available.'

Initially Faith chose another faculty member. Faith explained, "but then she wrote me, and said, 'okay, what you need to do is, write all three chapters, the proposal, and at the end of the proposal, then I would go through with it.' Faith said, "I got an answer from this one and another one, but this one said yes, she would work with me. I did some classes with her before, and I was telling her. She said yes, she would work with me."

Good's challenge was similar to Faith's challenge. However, Good said she met her "dissertation chair at a residency when he gave a presentation." Good said, "I was like, 'This is my guy. I need this guy to be my chair,' so I asked him if he would be my chair, and he said he would." Good said that the FPCU's research office had approved him as well as had approved her second committee member and her prospectus. Good said suddenly, "I like started writing my dissertation and seeking a committee member."

Good explained, "He was approved, and later [FPCU's name omitted] said, 'oh no, this guy is not approved.' Good said forming the committee was "a big problem," and

Good added, “I actually contacted over 10 different people, maybe more than that. Maybe as many as 15: just sending them e-mail s; sending them my prospectus, begging them to be on my committee.” Good continued, “Half of them never replied to my e-mail s. All the others said no, except for one person, so it was very hard to get the committee formed.” Good concluded, “I wasted a lot of money, just trying to get a committee formed. It took me at least five to six months to get that second committee member.”

Similar to Good, Love also “met” his “dissertation chair at a residency.” Unlike Faith and Good, Love talked about challenges he had with the dissertation chair. Love said, “First of all, he said he wouldn’t read what I was writing until I got it edited.” Love said that even though his dissertation chair refused to read his unedited work, which “was a delay,” his dissertation chair was “telling [him] to look up idioms, professors, or contexts.” Love said that he was confused about what he should do because of his dissertation chair’s mixed messages.

However, Love explained, “Ironically, I came understand that the reason he told me that was because she [“a White female student”] was using the same theory. So for the first three and a half years of my time in my dissertation, this gentleman delayed the progress.” For Love, this meant he had not received his dissertation chair’s approval for Chapter 1 even though he had spent 18 quarters in the dissertation phase of his program. Love said, initially, “I was thinking that it was just me, you know . . . as a *person* [emphasis added], not because I was Black or anything. I took it *personally* [emphasis added]. I begin to see that he was beginning to do the same thing to everyone else.” Love concluded, “So eventually, the complaints of menacing caused him to either resign, or he

was fired, and I had to find another chair, which was difficult. So my experience in this dissertation was quite challenging, in that sense."

Similar to Love, Faith also experienced challenges with her dissertation chair, but Faith's challenges with her dissertation chair were different. Faith, in contrast to Love, said, "I did my share. I don't blame my chair although he was supposed to be leading. We didn't get that checklist that we are supposed to be working with. I didn't know about that checklist until about [year omitted]," which was after the change in dissertation chair's. Faith continued, "So I believe we weren't . . . , we were not prepared for our dissertation, and I'm not the only one. We weren't prepared for it. We weren't, told exactly what to do," and Faith concluded, "so I messed up one because of my negligence, but also because I didn't have a chair who was *leading* [emphasis added]."

Forbearance also talked about similar challenges she experienced with forming her dissertation committee. Although Love and Faith did not emphasize the amount of time that they spent finding a dissertation chair and finding about the dissertation checklist, Forbearance said that "after spending nearly two quarters trying to get a dissertation chair using [FPCU's name omitted] list of available faculty," she "contacted the program director." Because "he was able to assign [her] a dissertation chair," Forbearance said "the biggest hurdles" for her when she was completing the dissertation phase "were getting [her] prospectus and IRB application approved."

Discussing the challenge she experienced with completing the prospectus, Forbearance said, "After the third quarter of working on it [the prospectus], I asked Dr. [name of dissertation chair omitted], 'what is it exactly that you want because I thought I

had answered every question?' Forbearance explained, "Dr. [name of dissertation chair omitted] tried her darnedest to explain it to me, but I didn't understand what she was talking about [what she was saying]," and Forbearance added, "Just a little tweaking is what I needed to do, but Dr. [name of dissertation chair omitted] was unable to explain it to me.' Forbearance concluded, "But she was explaining it to the best of her ability. I didn't understand what she was talking about [what she was saying]."

Unlike Forbearance's challenge with comprehending her dissertation chair's suggestions, Joy said her challenge with completing the dissertation came at the IRB step. Joy explained, "For me, once I got through the proposal, the next big hurdle was the IRB, which I had plenty of corrections to make there, and [the] IRB kind of got me discouraged." Joy said that she believed she was making great progress, "and [the] IRB set things back. It was just a mess, and so that discouraged me. And I think I walked away for like a month."

Joy continued, "I came back and got myself focused again; got through that; then, got the approval to collect data." Joy added, "Once I got to that part, I started rolling again: collecting data [and] analyzing data, Chapter 4 written, [and] Chapter 5 written very quickly. Very few corrections were needed." Similar to Joy, Forbearance also experienced some challenges with getting the IRB's approval.

Adding to Joy's comments, Forbearance said, "I submitted it [the IRB application]. Three days later, I get an e-mail saying, 'we need your proposal.' Forbearance said that after she e-mailed the IRB her proposal, the IRB sent her another e-

mail that said, ‘in 14 days, we going to respond to you.’ For Forbearance, that meant that “three days” had passed from the time she submitted her IRB application.

Forbearance said, “Five days after they get my proposal, they send me [an e-mail] saying, ‘you have a full board review on this day,’ and that day is the fourteenth day.” Explaining what a full board review is, Forbearance said, “On the IRB application, there are 40 questions that they ask you, [and] they have 40 questions on the form they sent me back. The full board review is when the whole committee looks at your application.”

As Forbearance continued, she said, “Then, they fill out this form that has 40 separate questions on it that are broken up from the IRB application, but it’s three sections. Out of them 40 questions, *20* of them needed clarification on my IRB application.” Forbearance added, “*20* [emphasis added] of my things needed clarification . . . , *20* [emphasis added]. So I had to clarify 20 things, and some of those clarifications were confusing.” Forbearance concluded, “That took a month. Basically, I had three full board reviews that took 18 weeks for me to get my approval done . . . , *18* weeks to get my approval.”

Within the participants’ narratives, there is a sense of silent frustration, but Faith and Good said they did not perceive that there was anyone they could file a formal grievance. Faith said, “there was nobody you could complain to.” Good added, “I got the feeling that if I never formed my committee nobody would care.” Faith also said that she stopped out of the program for a “year or so” because of the issues she had with following the FPCU’s procedures, but unlike these participants, Forbearance was proactive in her approach. Forbearance said:

> So when I say extremely satisfied, I don't mean I didn't have times when I wanted to quit. During those 18 weeks, week 10, I was ready to get up out of there [quit the program], waiting for IRB approval. I was like finished, quit: I was done, but see, talking to the academic advisor. When I called him and told him that I wanted to be withdrawn from the university, he said, "I think you should wait." I called my friend, [name omitted], my dissertation buddy, [and] talked to her. I e-mail ed my dissertation chair and told her "I was finished. I don't see how anybody could take this long to have three..., four board reviews, and 18 weeks of IRB approval." It was really ridiculous.

Study participants also talked both their relationships with their dissertation chairs/mentors. They indicated that their experiences with them were both positive and negative. Faith, Good, and Joy said they had an African American dissertation chair, and Peace said she had an African American committee member, which they explicitly or implicitly implied enhanced their ability to establish a relationship with them.

Faith, Forbearance, Good, Joy, and Love said that they did not view their dissertation chairs or committees members as mentors based on their definition of what a mentor is and of what a mentor does. All participants described their dissertation chairs or committee members' traits that they perceived enhanced their ability to establish a relationship with them. They used phrases, such as "he established himself as a great leader;" "she kept me on task;" "she was always moving me forward," and "she was very, very thorough."

The results also revealed variations in their dissertation chairs/mentors' approaches to guiding study participants in completing the chapters for the dissertation. Love said, "When it came to the interactions of writing the dissertation, I learned to give all myself over to my chair [his second dissertation chair] if my chair says something." Love added, "He established himself as a great leader, and I allowed myself to be led by him." Love said he did what his dissertation advised him to do, and said, "If he said to me that this is what I want you to do; this is what I want you to focus on; make an adjustment here and only here, that's what I did, and I didn't argue about it." Love said he did not question what his dissertation chair was suggesting that he does, and Love added, "I didn't question it. I didn't question it to the point to where it would create an issue between the two of us."

Kind said her "mentor" helped with editing. Kind specifically said, "He questioned me on certain things to make sure that I was clear on what I was doing and telling me what he understood my writing to say." Peace agreed, and added, "That was an issue that we always had, my mentor and myself. I wouldn't send up my papers unless, in my mind, I thought they were perfect, so she would get on me often. She would call me [and] text me," but Forbearance's dissertation chair's approach was the most unique. Forbearance said, "We did our chapters in sections. She let us do our chapters in sections."

Unlike the other participants, Faith said, "I pretty much had to do my work, *and* I had to do my chair's [her first dissertation chair] work. I had to discern what's next and point it out, and say, 'this is where we go from here,' and Faith said, "I didn't have a

chair who would was say, 'okay here's the guidelines for your dissertation, follow it wisely' or stuff like that." Faith added, "but I believe, we, each person have a chair that is paid, and they should have been *leading* us. They should have been *guiding* us. I'm not saying that they should be doing our work, but the major things." Faith continued, "like use the checklist; give you like pointers and that, I didn't get that at all. I . . . , I was on my own." This finding illuminated differences their dissertation chairs/mentors' mentoring style.

Study participants' dissertation topics focused on a range of subjects. All agreed that the key people involved in their dissertation experiences "were receptive" of their dissertation topics. Forbearance, Good, Love, and Peace chose to focus on work-related issues. In contrast, Kind was the only participant who chose to focus on a topic for the sake of exploring the topic, and only Faith and Joy said that they chose to conduct research concerning African American-related issues.

Although Faith and Joy lived in different parts of the United States and were in different age groups, they said that they selected these topics because of a personal concern. Faith said she changed her topic once, but Faith's focus remained on African American-related issues. Faith said she chose to focus on a topic related to issues concerning "Black men," which Faith said stemmed from her concern as a Black Christian female who serves as "a mentor and a role model for her nephews." However, Joy said she chose to focus on a topic related to issues concerning "Black females," which Joy said stemmed from her being a Black mother who has the responsibility of "raising young Black girls" to become accomplished Black women. Love indicated that

he chose to focus on a topic that stemmed from his "observation of Black co-workers' behavior," but Love did not say that his dissertation topic specifically focused on African American-related issues.

Study participants used various research methods. Faith, Kind, and Love chose to employ "quantitative methods." Unlike the other participants, Love chose to "work with archival data." Love said that his first dissertation chair had suggested doing because he "would be able to bypass the data collection step." Forbearance, Joy, and Peace chose to employ "qualitative methods." Unlike the other participants, Peace said she chose to conduct "a qualitative case study, using four cases." In contrast, Good was the only participant who chose to conduct a "true experiment with an intervention."

In total, participants who used quantitative methods spent 22 years in their programs, and participants who used qualitative methods spent 17 years and 6 months in their programs. Some participants acknowledged that the FPCU's doctoral coursework phase requirements might have been more effective for preparing them for the dissertation experience had the FPCU curriculum been designed so that dissertation topic development would be introduced during the coursework phase of their programs. Participants who linked their coursework to their dissertation topic indicated that doing this allowed them to have some preliminary research on the topic in place when they eventually reached the dissertation phase of their programs. The data indicated that the time participants who linked their coursework assignments to their dissertation topic and the time participants who did not link their coursework assignments to their dissertation topic was approximately the same.

The majority of participants said that they did not experience stereotype threat or belonging uncertainty as a Black student who was pursuing a field that non-Black individuals have historically dominated, and at an institution characterized by high student attrition and low graduation rates. Generally, participants agreed that even though they chose to pursue a field that non-Black individuals have historically dominated, they, as a Black student, felt that they belonged in their particular doctoral psychology programs at their chosen FPCUs. Why they felt they belonged varied. Some participants termed feeling that they belonged to "having a voice" and "having an African American dissertation chair." Others explicitly or implicitly said fear of fulfilling stereotypes associated with Black people in general, and feeling uncertain about whether they belonged in their online doctoral psychology programs at their chosen FPCUs "never" entered their minds.

Kind said, "Online, I don't think I felt out of place, or that I was treated differently. It was like I got a voice online that I didn't have face-to-face." Good added, "The fact that my chair was African American was a big plus for me, and I was able to avoid like stereotype threats and negatively impactful things that might have emerged." Disagreeing with them, Faith who was older said, "They didn't bother me. I was pursuing what I wanted to pursue, and [it] had nothing to do with them or [with] what research says."

Agreeing with Faith, Joy added, "I went to an HBCU, and my master's program at [HBCU's name omitted] was a Black psychology focused program. For years that was all I saw, and [it] wasn't even like, 'what, Black women don't do this.' Adding to these

participants' statements, Peace responded, "Honestly, I never felt that way. I've always been as if I do belong. I never felt insecure about what my ambition should be, or what field I should be pursuing."

None of the participants reported being "dissatisfied" or being "extremely dissatisfied" when they considered the outcome relative to what they had expected when they entered the doctoral psychology programs at their chosen FPCUs, and to what they had experienced. They described their satisfaction with two expressions: "extremely satisfied" and "satisfied." Faith, Forbearance, Love, and Peace based their level of satisfaction on what they had experienced rather than on what they had expected when they entered their programs.

Faith said that she was "extremely satisfied" with the outcome. Faith related her extreme satisfaction with the outcome to what she experienced during the doctoral coursework phase and the dissertation phase of the clinical psychology program at her FPCU. Faith specifically said,

> The program was awesome. I learned a lot, but in the practice of getting to where I am today, it was a real struggle. Real struggle in terms of turning in assignments and not getting them back on time. Let me focus on my dissertation; sending in my different chapters and different work and not getting them back on time or getting them back without getting back the appropriate feedback, or getting specific ideas to work with. So when I say I'm really extremely satisfied being where I am, it's essentially because the struggles that I've gone through, and I see that I have really overcome and finished. It's really an awesome spirit.

Agreeing with Faith, Forbearance considered the outcome relative to what she experienced in the general psychology program at her FPCU. Faith described her extreme satisfaction as follows:

> I am extremely satisfied because I completed my Ph.D. I have my diploma in hand, on my mirror, so I'm extremely satisfied. I mean I went through all kinds of things. It took a year to get my prospectus: four quarters to get my prospectus approved. It took me *18* weeks to get IRB approval. Those were the big hurdles. My extreme satisfaction is from earning my degree. I went through ups and downs. Yeah, in the program, I went through many trials and tribulations.

Love described his "extreme satisfaction," when he considered the outcome relative to what he experienced in the industrial and organizational psychology program at his FPCU differently. Love said, "The reason that I was extremely satisfied was because the only goal that I set was that I was going to focus on my dissertation topic, and I achieved that." In contrast, Joy and Peace based their level of satisfaction on their having a "smooth" experience and their professors "who went above what was expected in the classes." However, their levels of satisfaction were not the same.

Peace said she was "extremely satisfied" with the outcome in light of what she experienced in the industrial and organizational psychology program at her FPCU whereas Joy said she was "satisfied." Describing her satisfaction in light of what she expected when she began the educational psychology program at her chosen FPCU, Joy said:

> I mean I finished, you know. You hear so many stories about people going through just even regular brick-and-mortar doctoral programs, about nightmares, and online programs have their own unique things that happen. I was just incredibly blessed [shown favor by God; endowed with supernatural ability and supernatural protection] in that going through the program was incredibly smooth. My classes were smooth. The dissertation process was smooth. I couldn't have asked for a better experience.

Similarly, Good and Kind based their level of satisfaction on what they expected, not on what they experienced. Good was also "satisfied" with the outcome, similar to Joy. However, Good based her satisfaction on what she expected when she entered the industrial and organizational psychology program at her chosen FPCU, stating that her "expectations were low." Kind also based her level of satisfaction on what she expected when she entered the industrial and organizational psychology program at her chosen FPCU. However, similar to the other participants, Kind expressed "extreme satisfaction."

In short, in this theme, the participants talked about their experiences with completing the dissertation phase of their programs. Table 4 displays additional information about the participants. It includes information regarding the participants, the time they spent completing the dissertation phase, their research focus, their research method, and the number of years it took them to complete their programs. The time participants spent completing the dissertation ranged from 18 months to 72 months, and the total time participants spent completing their programs requirements for degree attainment ranged from 5 to 10 years.

The FPCUs' employed different instructional methods for completing the dissertation, but the requirements were the same: a research prospectus, a dissertation proposal (with an oral defense) as well as IRB approval to conduct the final study and the final study (with an oral defense). Most participants provided detailed descriptions of what they did to complete the dissertation. Several participants' experiences were similar, but all study participants who attained their degrees from FPCU 2 encountered a number of challenges completing the dissertation phase of their programs, and the majority of these participants said they met several challenges completing the procedures their FPCU had in place for completing the dissertation. These participants also did not view their dissertation chairs and committee members as their mentors, including those whose dissertation chairs were Black.

Participants' relationships with their dissertation chairs/mentors were both positive and negative. There were variations in their dissertation chairs/mentors' approaches to guiding study participants in completing the chapters for the dissertation. Study participants' dissertation topics focused on a range of subjects; most chose work-related topics, and two chose personal topics that focused on African American-related issues. All participants perceived that the key people involved in their dissertation experience were receptive of their dissertation topics, and the majority expressed that they were "extremely satisfied" or "satisfied" with the outcome relative to what they experienced.

Study participants used various research methods. Only one participant conducted an experiment with and intervention, and the remaining participants' equally used

qualitative or quantitative research methods. Even though all participants acknowledged that finishing their degrees at in an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU was challenging, the majority of participants said that did not experience stereotype threat or belonging uncertainty. As Black students who was pursuing a field that non-Black individuals have historically dominated, and at an institution characterized by high student attrition and low graduation rates, all participants said that they felt they belonged even though their reasons for belonging certainty varied.

Theme 6: Cultural Knowledge

In this cluster, study participants talked about the significant factors that contributed to their finishing their degrees at their FPCUs. All participants described the learning materials and resources they used. Some indicated that the materials and resources provided by their FPCUs were significant factors that contributed to their finishing their programs. Joy said, "I used the library a lot. I used the writing center maybe once. I can't remember which chapter I submitted to them, just to have them look at it, but other than that, I did all of my editing myself."

Agreeing with Joy, Faith said, "I used the librarian sometimes when I couldn't find what I wanted, or when I saw an article somewhere else and was unable to get it, or [I] asked them for general questions." Similar to Joy, she added, "I submitted my work to the writing center once." Peace agreed, "I had my librarian who was a beautiful person. She was very, very helpful with helping me with researching and where to look." Unlike Joy, Faith and Peace said their FPCUs' "online librarian was a key person."

Forbearance and Kind emphasized other learning materials and resources offered by their FPCUs. Kind said she "attended an additional colloquia and an additional writing intensive," and Kind said these were useful for providing her with "immediate answers and feedback." Similarly, Forbearance attended a "dissertation intensive," which is where Forbearance met her dissertation buddy who also was in her dissertation class. Forbearance said the dissertation intensive was very helpful because she needed face-to-face interactions and immediate feedback from the "editors, faculty, and qualitative methodologists" who were there. Forbearance also said that she also found a "Ph.D. blog" sponsored by her chosen FPCU that was helpful for "answering some questions."

Several participants emphasized other learning materials and resources they located on their own to help them finish their degrees. Joy and Peace used "qualitative data analysis software" to assist them with "analyzing" their "data." Forbearance described how she located and employed other resources to help her overcome the challenge she had with getting her prospectus approved.

Forbearance said, "I got a tutor from my son's tutoring services, so I got a writing tutor for two weeks. She came in. I gave her my questions. She said, 'this one, you have not answered the question.' She said that the writing tutor, "looked at what I had written in my prospectus, and she told me, 'This is what you need to do. You need to answer this question, this question, this question.' She came back a second time, two weeks later." As Forbearance continued, she said, "She *helped* me. She was a *writing* tutor." Forbearance added, "I started the fourth quarter. My prospectus got approved because I was not

answering the question. The writing tutor helped me see *how* I wasn't answering the question."

Good and Joy discussed the difficulty they had with trying to begin the dissertation with Chapter 2, which is the literature review, as their dissertation chairs suggested. Unlike Joy and similar to Forbearance, Good said that, after what she called "wasting a year trying to write Chapter 2 first," she hired a dissertation coach. Good said that the dissertation coach assured her that "it would be okay to for [her] to write Chapter 1 first." Joy also said that she "eventually started with Chapter 1."

Good said that she and the dissertation coach conducted weekly 30-minute phone sessions. Good stated, "I paid him money for this: to one, hold me accountable to produce measurable progress, and two, to discuss any frustrations I had with [FPCU's name omitted] or just [with] the dissertation." Good said this was his only role. Good added, "All we talked about is how I can accelerate my dissertation. So my coach and I worked a lot around how to organize my life, so that I could have the time that I needed to work on it."

Faith, Forbearance, Good, Joy, Love, and Peace emphasized the importance of their families and significant others' encouragement and support for their finishing their programs. Forbearance described how having a dissertation buddy was important for her to finish the program. Forbearance said, "I went through the whole writing of the chapters with [her]. We helped each other. We Skyped every Sunday; even today, we still Skype each other, so having somebody to go through the process with you. We pushed each other."

Good underscored the importance of the encouragement and support from her family and dissertation coach for her completing her program. Describing it, Good said, "My family telling me, 'don't quit' like, 'keep going.' My husband could understand because he was also pursuing a doctorate, so the fact that I had somebody, close, who had also experienced the same challenges. That made a difference." Joy agreed with these participants. Joy described how she "needed support" from her "family and people around her." Similar to Good, Joy said that she "received support from friends from [her] former HBCU who were also pursuing their doctorates at the same FPCU."

Joy also said her husband caring for their daughters "enabled [her] to focus on writing," Joy added that the support from her "parents" and her "in-laws" also were "important factors," Joy stated, "They would keep my girls for an extra couple of hours because they knew I had work to do. They would cook for us; sometimes bringing me food. I needed that support." Adding to Joy's comments, Peace described how the "support from [her] mom was a significant factor" in her finishing her degree. Peace said, "One thing that really helped me was my mom is retired now, so while I was writing, she would proofread my work, so I finished."

Unlike the other participants, Love described how having the "financial support from [his] employer was a significant factor" that contributed to his success. Love mentioned that having his employer's financial support "removed the stress and worry" about whether he would "run out of money." Love said, "It ensured that [he] would not run out of student loan funds before [he] finished [his] program." In contrast, Kind was the only participant who did not mention that having encouragement and support from

family and significant others were significant factors in her finishing her degree at her FPCU.

Participants also talked about the "most significant factor that contributed to their finishing their degrees at an FPCU." The majority agreed that they and "God" were the "most significant factors" that contributed to their finishing their degrees at their FPCUs. Forbearance said, "My will; my determination to complete it through all obstacles, real or imagined." Joy agreed, and said,

> I think it's a matter of persistence. It's a choice that you make. You make the choice. You make the choice to do it, and you can do it, but you have to make the choice. You have to persist through it, no matter what. Even when it looks like it's not gonna work out, you just have to persist.

Adding to their comments, Kind described how she was the most significant factor for finishing her program as follows:

> I find it hard not to finish something I've started. If I took taking the time to research, think about, and meditate on whether or not to do something, and I decided to do it, it must be finished. That's just a . . . , that's a part of my personality. I had started it. It would have just been a waste of time and money, and I can get back neither, so I had to finish. To finish, it was a *must*. I could do it, single parent, from a blue-collar family while working to make a living. I could do it. I did it.

Peace agreed. Similar to Forbearance, Peace also emphasized that she was the most significant factor in her finishing her degree at her FPCU. Peace said,

> It wasn't [FPCU's name omitted]. It was just me; my ambition to complete, so it wasn't an option of ABD for me. I personally would never be happy with myself if I didn't complete my Ph.D. That was my ambition, online or brick-and-mortar. There was never a perception that I would not achieve; would not have finished it.

Unlike like these participants, Love emphasized his commitment to his employer. Love said, "If a Black person decided to stop doing the program because of a life event, then I think it was an excuse that said, 'I can't afford it,' and so it comes back to the money." As Love concluded, he said, "So the bottom line is that having my employer to pay for the bulk of my tuition, to have a status of ABD, all but dissertation, was not an option for me."

Similarly, Joy emphasized her responsibility to her ancestors. Joy said, "It was a responsibility. It was a duty. It was a calling, and it was something that I strongly felt like I needed to do. I knew I needed to do several years before I even started it." Joy added, "I knew it was some kind of a calling, so I think I drew upon my ancestors and all the people who came before me. I felt like it was something that I needed to do for them."

Faith, Good, Joy, and Love narratives also indicated that maintaining African American cultural practices and values was essential to their completing their degrees. They described it in terms of "a calling," "faith," "God," "praying," and "putting it God's hands." Faith talked about how she solicited the prayers of her church members, her mom, and her sister when she felt discouraged. Faith said, "I would be on the prayer line [In Christiandom refers to intercessory communication to God on the behalf of someone else] with them [women at her church] when I felt like I lost all hope in the system and

everything." Describing significant factors, Faith added, "My mom, and I have a twin sister. She feels everything that I feel."

Similarly, Good said, "I prayed consistently. I prayed consistently. That was very important. God [In Christiandom God is the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent Creator and the Overseer of all things] never told me when I would graduate, but I just kept praying. . . . to maintain my sanity and to have favor [In Christiandom refers to God's supernatural kindness that is expressed in the acts of others] throughout the process." Joy agreed.

Joy said that her faith [In King James's Version of the Bible, Hebrews 11:1 states, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen."] helped her to persevere. Joy added, "So I had to put it in God's hands, and He would be the One writing. I couldn't have done it without God. I could not have done it without Him being there every step of the way." Love agreed, and he said, "Truly, my religious and spiritual base was a strong influence as well."

The results also revealed instances where the participants' cultural values were influential in their ability to finish their degrees at their FPCUs. Love, unlike the other participants, also related his knowledge of how civil rights activists responded to adversity to his ability to finish his degree at his FPCU, particularly overcoming the encounter with his first dissertation chair. Love said, "It was purely the harder the water that they push on me, the harder I push to move forward. The harder they push me back, the harder I move forward." Love added, "So my resilience was not completely broken, but it was a challenge."

The majority of participants' expressions related to how attaining an education was the expected norm in their families or among the people who they respected. Peace related it to her family values. Peace said, "I come from a family where education was very, very important." Peace added, "whether you decided you wanted to do a trade, or you wanted to earn a degree, graduating from high school was just a stepping stone to further your education."

In contrast, adding to his previous statement, Loved remarked, "But the part of me that I believe I can accredit it to is being born in the 60s." Love said that, "being born in the 60s, we were culturally taught by our surroundings that we had to be twice as good or twice as better than the White students [were]." Love also said, "we had to work twice as hard, which means that despite whatever hurdle or barrier that we are confronted with, we have to press on and maintain and continue and sustain ourselves." Love concluded, "I believe that's what was working as an underlining factor."

Love and Peace were around the same age. However, Peace's perception was different. Peace said, "I was brought up in a culture where education is considered the ladder to success. You gain respect from your level of education; it's not money that makes." Peace said that, in her culture, having money was essential, "but you get much more respect if you are educated."

Peace also emphasized how, in her family, "Education was important: learning as much as you can, exploring new ideas, [and] trying new things." Peace added, "We were raised where the sky was the limit, and culturally, we were taught that you are just as valuable as the other person [is]." Peace concluded, "we were never made to feel inferior.

We were told, 'You decide what you want to do, and how you are accepted and being treated.' That's how we were raised, culturally."

In short, in this theme, study participants talked about the significant factors that contributed to their finishing their degrees at their FPCUs. Many emphasized the learning materials and resources they used that were provided by their FPCUs. Several emphasized the learning materials and resources that they located outside their FPCUs. The majority emphasized the importance of having support from their families or significant others to their finishing their degrees. Many emphasized that they and or God were the most significant factors that contributed to their finishing their degrees at their FPCUs. They related these to African American cultural practices and or African American cultural values.

Theme 7: Self-Actualization

This theme emerged as the culminating theme within the data. All participants expressed a general fascination with human behavior. Faith, Forbearance, and Kind described the curiosity as emerging from their observations of other people, particularly people in authority roles. Good, Joy, Love, and Peace described psychology as "something" they had "always" been interested in or "wanted to do."

Many participants focused on where their experiences fit within the scheme of their immediate family members' educational backgrounds when they had enrolled into their doctoral psychology programs at their FPCUs. Joy said, "I'm not the first person who has gone to college." Joy added, "In my immediate family, I am the only one with a

terminal degree. Both of my parents and my brother have master's degrees, so that's standard to at least have an advanced degree."

Agreeing with Joy, Peace said, "My mom had completed her Ph.D. in education, and my dad, he was an engineer. My sisters and brothers are master's level. One sister is a doctor, pediatrician." However, Peace added, "I have one son; he's 22, shooting for his MBA this year from [PWI's name omitted]." Forbearance said that her "older sister attained a master's degree from an online program," and Kind said that her "mother attained a master's degree."

Unlike like these participants, Faith, Good, and Love focused on being first-generation college students when they had decided to pursue their doctorates in psychology. Faith said she has "six siblings." However, Faith said, "I am the "first in my family to attend college." Unlike Faith, Good said that she "is an only child," and Good said, "When I entered the doctoral psychology program, neither of my parents had attended college." Good added, "My husband was also pursuing a doctorate in education at the same FPCU." Love said he was the "only person from the projects" that he "grew up in who had achieved a Ph.D.," and he was the "only person in [his] family who had achieved a college education."

Several participants emphasized the importance of what they were doing in pursuing and having attained a doctorate in psychology. Good said, "Attaining a doctorate in psychology means self-actualization because you've reach a goal you set for yourself." Joy remarked, "My daughters were the whole reason why I was even getting my doctorate, anyway: to be a role model, trailblazer, to show them that you can do

anything that you want to do." Joy continued, "and to put myself in a situation where I open opportunities for myself, professionally. You know, so that I have more opportunities to spend more time with them." She concluded, "I can decide what, how, and when I want to work, and that's what I wanted to do." Faith agreed, and added,

> I am like setting the pace for my nieces and my nephews. I have two nephews attending medical school, so I am like their mentor and the person that they look up to. So I have to do things, not only for me…, ascertain. Achieve not only for myself, but also for my nieces and nephews who look up to me.

Some termed it as the reason they would recommend an online doctoral psychology program. Kind stated, "I did it. I finished." Finishing for Good meant as a "full-time employee and a single parent who came from a blue-collar family."

Agreeing with Kind, Faith said, "I can be a great hope. I can be a mentor. I can be somebody's example. Somebody can look at me and say, 'If she can do it, I can do it.' Faith added, "I can be a [role] model for younger African American children." Faith concluded, "And that makes me feel wonderful. That makes me feel great that the Lord has blessed [In Christiandom means to endow and to entrust with gives] me with the stuff I could accomplish."

Several participants expressed an awareness of online learning, although flexible, customarily requiring more ability, more discipline, more flexibility, and more independent-type learning. Good said, "I prayed consistently. I prayed consistently. That was very important, you know. God never told me when I would graduate, but I just kept praying. . . . to maintain my sanity and to have favor throughout the process."

Love added, “I didn’t concern myself with some of the challenges at the institution because, to me, God told me to do what I am doing or did, and so I did what God told me to do.” Love added, “I achieved what *God* [emphasis added] asked me to do, so I am extremely satisfied with doing what God asked me to do.” Joy agreed, and added, “It’s validating because I already knew this is what I was supposed to do. It was something God laid on my heart a long time ago, and so it was validating to finish.”

Agreeing with Joy, Peace ascertained, “I don’t see any limitations to a person achieving their highest potential: if they have the drive; if they continue; if they really want it. They gotta have the ambition, too.” Kind agreed and concluded, “When I walked across the stage this time, it was different from the times that I walked across the stage. I knew that I had finished what I started. Education is great. It is something that I have accomplished.”

Unlike these participants, Good concluded, “But there is more you feel you need to achieve.” Love agreed, and added, “I’ve accomplished a dissertation, and I’ve accomplished this Ph.D.,” and Love concluded, “As a Black person, I feel that there is more that I need to do to be contributing to mankind. Otherwise, it’s a waste of my time. It’s a waste of God’s time.”

Forbearance partially agreed. Speaking on social change, Forbearance said, “That was what my whole aim was from the beginning of the program to the end. It was to somehow impact society.” Forbearance added, “the part of society that I was able to impact or touch or just give a glimmer of something different. Like to make them see what I see and see it clearer.”

Finally, study participants also discussed what life has been like for them since they have finished their degrees at their FPCUs. Peace said, “First, I got a promotion at work, and I now have a side consulting business that I do for organizations, and I also teach. It enhanced my work, my earning power.” Kind agreed, and added, “I definitely see there are more opportunities available to me. I mean as soon as I finished my degree, I [was] received into two institutions as a psychologist.” Kind explained, “whereas prior to and during the time that I was working on [finishing the industrial and organizational psychology program] both of those opportunities weren’t even made available to me,” and she concluded, “but as soon as I finished, degree was conferred, opportunities opened, so that would be the number one, opportunity.”

Good agreed with Peace and Kind. Good said, “I was able to get a position as an industrial and organizational psychologist, in industry. I also work as a full-time faculty member, and so it’s been good. I’m happy with my decision and would do it again.” Good concluded, “I’ve been able to move forward in my career with the [FPCU’s name omitted] degree, so I’ve been happy.”

Agreeing with these participants, Joy said, “Well, the first most important thing is that I got a pay raise, personal fact. I got a pay raise, as a Black psychologist. I’ve changed. I immediately came into a new county where I am the only Black psychologist.” Joy added. “It’s, I guess, kind of a borderline rural county. I just believe that there is still a sense of just not quite being incredibly trusting, or at times, I feel like I’m in the position where have to continually prove myself.”

Unlike these participants, Forbearance said, “It has changed my outlook on what my purpose is. I feel more secure. I feel I can see clearer, and I know what I know, and if I don’t know it, I can go to research to find it.” Forbearance added, “I know there’s something out there that can answer that question and that there has been current research on that topic, and I’m gonna find it because I know it’s out there in the literature.”

In short, this theme emerged as the culminating theme within the data. Many participants described psychology as “something” they had “always” been interested in or “wanted to do.” Several described the curiosity as emerging from their observations of other people, particularly people in authority roles.

Many also indicated that they were not the first in their immediate families to attend college. Several said that they were first-generation college students. Others emphasized the importance of what they were doing in pursuing and having attained a doctorate in psychology to their families and to themselves. Several also expressed an awareness of online learning, although flexible, customarily requiring more ability, more discipline, more flexibility, and more independent-type learning. Many had experienced more autonomy and upward mobility since they have finished their programs and attained their doctorates.

Summary

The research questions that I used in this study were an outgrowth of previous research findings. I developed them from other researchers’ recommendations for future research. What is the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who finished an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU was the central question

I sought to answer. What is the lived experience of Black students who completed an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU, and what are the factors that contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees at an FPCU were subquestions.

The results from data analysis indicated that common experiences among study participants included their selecting a suitable FPCU, selecting a specialty area, negotiating transfer credit, completing the doctoral coursework phase, and completing the dissertation phase. The most significant factor contributing to the participants' finishing their degrees at an FPCU, based on these results, was their cultural knowledge. From these results, self-actualization informed the meaning of academic achievement for Black FPCU doctorate recipients in this sample. Using these results, I provide a discussion as well as offer my conclusions and recommendations in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The objective of this phenomenological study was to explore how Black students in online psychology doctoral programs experience the dissertation process. I specifically examined how a group of these students finished their degrees at their FPCUs and what factors contributed to their success. I designed the study to create an in-depth understanding of the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate in psychology at an FPCU. A phenomenological design was used to explore the effectiveness of FPCUs' doctoral psychology programs in order to help academic employers, employers, policymakers, and FPCU administrators understand how Black FPCU doctorate recipients experience the transition to the role of the independent researcher, and what factors contribute to these students finishing their degrees at an FPCU.

Black FPCU doctorate recipients' academic achievement was the central phenomenon explored in this study, particularly the influence of SDL and cultural factors. The findings revealed that self-actualization informed the meaning of academic achievement for this sample of doctoral recipients. Study participants shared their experiences of selecting and executing suitable learning approaches, developing learning goals, determining learning needs, initiating learning, and assessing learning outcomes. Their selecting a suitable FPCU, selecting a specialty area, negotiating transfer credit, completing the doctoral coursework phase, and completing the dissertation phase informed these experiences. The findings also suggested cultural knowledge, including

locating learning material and resources, informed the significant factors that contributed to this sample of Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees at an FPCU.

Interpretation of the Findings

Researchers know relatively nothing about Black online, doctoral psychology students who finish their degrees at an FPCU, or the factors that contribute to their ability to finish their degrees at an FPCU. The findings from the current study extend knowledge in the discipline, assisting current efforts. In this study, Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU talked candidly about their academic achievement. They focused on their experiences as a Black student who was pursuing a field that non-Black individuals have historically dominated, and at an institution characterized by high student attrition and low graduation rates.

An initial step was to select a suitable FPCU. This was followed by their selecting a specialty area, negotiating transfer credit, completing the doctoral coursework phase, and completing the dissertation phase. The majority of participants saw an association between attaining their doctorates in psychology and their self-actualization. This suggests that academic achievement was manifested in self-actualization.

Some study participants focused on why they chose their particular FPCU, why they chose their particular specialty areas, and how they negotiated transfer credits. Others focused on how they approached the coursework and on what they did after they reached ABD status. Some focused their being able to be a role model for future generations within their families. Others talked about the potential impact their

achievement can have on future generations of African American children, other adults seeking to attain a doctorate at an FPCU, and on society.

Study participants used cultural knowledge to overcome challenges, to manage stress, and to motivate themselves by locating learning materials and resources, maintaining African American cultural practices, and maintaining African American cultural values. This finding, combined with the strategies they used, suggests that culturally specific, personal factors and university-related factors were contributors to their finishing their degrees at the FPCUs. Study participants overcame challenges by using learning materials and resources provided by the FPCUs and by using other learning materials and resources that they located on their own. Some participants used learning materials and resources they located within the FPCUs, including their FPCUs' "online library," "writing center," "online librarian," "writing intensive," "dissertation intensive," and "Ph.D. blog."

Several participants used other learning materials and resources they found outside their FPCUs, including "a qualitative data analysis tool," "a writing tutor," and "a dissertation coach." Many managed stress by exercising "faith," believing in "God," "praying," "putting it God's hands," and "soliciting the prayers" and obtaining "help" from "church members," "mom," and "twin sister." Few maintained their motivation by relating overcoming their challenges and finishing their degrees to their knowledge of how civil rights activists responded to adversity and to how attaining an education was the expected norm in their families or among the people who they respected. Others

"drew upon [their] ancestors and all the people who came before [them], [feeling] like it was something that [they] needed to do for them."

Hall (2010) showed that Black adults chose to enroll at the FPCUs because of their open admissions policies that waived applicants' GRE scores, and their ability to provide racial anonymity. Hall also found that Black adults who desired a doctorate chose to attend FPCUs because at TCUs they had to meet particular gatekeeper measures, and because the TCUs placed them on long waiting lists even though they had passed the GRE (Hall, 2010). Others balked at the GRE or postponed enrolling in a doctoral program because of the GRE (Hall, 2010). The current study results showed otherwise: The majority of the current study's participants did not mention that these factors were what led them to enroll at their chosen FPCUs.

The Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU in this study were specific about which learning approach was the most suitable for them. This was evident in their divisiveness in Theme 1: Selecting an FPCU. Their stories emphasized the importance of the option of having the online learning approach available. Previous researchers maintained that within online environments, adult students could develop higher self-efficacy (Chou & Liu, 2005). Consistent with this research, the current study's participants generally agreed that the structure of the FPCUs were beneficial. They said it allowed them accessibility and flexibility in finishing their doctorates. These also were significant factors for why several participants said they would recommend attaining a doctorate from an online program to people they know.

Lovitts (2008) found that when students were intrinsically motivated, they were more creative and were likely to complete the dissertation phase with ease. In contrast to participants in Lovitts, the current study's participants equally experienced challenges with completing the dissertation phase even though all participants appeared to be intrinsically motivated. The current study's participants were specific about their learning goals. This was evident in Theme 2: Selecting a Specialty Area. Most participants mentioned that they had always been interested in psychology, and many had explored other disciplines such as "adult education," "arts," "business," and "political science" before discovering that "psychology" was their "passion." Most generally agreed that their career plans related to their pursuing a doctorate in psychology. Most chose to attain a doctorate in industrial and organizational psychology.

Moreover, the findings of the current study did not indicate a notable difference in the time spent completing the program for participants who had and participants who had not attained an undergraduate and a graduate degree in psychology when they entered their programs. Although the findings indicated notable differences in the time spent completing the program for the two participants who had attained an undergraduate and a graduate degree in psychology when they entered their programs, differences in their transfer credits, when they developed their dissertation topic, linking coursework to their dissertation, and differences in their research designs might explain the variance. These were evident in Themes 3: Negotiating Transfer Credits, 4: Completing the Doctoral Coursework Phase, and 5: Completing the Dissertation Phase. In contrast to Lovitts (2008), this finding, combined with similarities in the time the participants spent

completing their programs, and combined with differences in the participants' educational backgrounds and prior content-knowledge, suggests that these were not significant factors in this study because all participants finished their dissertations.

Even if more of the current study's participants had attained a graduate degree in psychology, the findings revealed that, similar to Edmondson et al.'s (2012) participants, one strategy all of the current study's participants used was self-direction. Consistent with Garrison (1997), from this viewpoint, participants were at the center of learning, taking responsibility for constructing meaning as they collaborated with others and confirmed useful knowledge. Similar to participants in Gasman et al. (2008), Hall (2010), Henfield et al. (2010), and Hunn-Merriweather (2008), Theme 6: Cultural Knowledge emerged. The current study's participants, similar to participants in these studies, experienced many challenges, and they used cultural knowledge to overcome challenges, to manage stress, and to motivate themselves by locating learning materials and resources, maintaining African American cultural practices, and maintaining African American cultural values.

From of this finding, combined with previous findings, I posit that the current study's participants were self-directed learners because they achieved their goal of finishing their degrees, despite their challenges and their stress. This was strong in Themes 1: Selecting an FPCU, 2: Selecting a Specialty Area, 5: Completing the Dissertation Phase, and 7: Self-Actualization. Edmondson et al. (2012) found that students who possessed high levels of SDL traits, particularly creativity, were active students who autonomously managed their own learning. They were independent learners

and efficient problem-solvers who enjoyed learning (Boyer et al., 2014; Shinkarvera & Benson, 2007). Similar to Gasman et al.'s (2008) participants, the current study's participants chose dissertation topics that were meaningful to them, including topics that focused on African American-related issues.

In contrast to Gasman et al. (8008), the results showed that as a Black student who was pursuing a field that non-Black individuals have historically dominated, and at an institution characterized by high student attrition and low graduation rates, the majority of the current study's participants reported that they did not experience stereotype threat or belonging uncertainty. Generally, they agreed that even though they chose to pursue a field that non-Black individuals have historically dominated, they, as Black students, felt that they belonged in their particular doctoral psychology programs at their FPCUs. Belonging certainty was strong in Themes 1: Selecting an FPCU, 2: Selecting a Specialty Area, 5: Completing the Dissertation Phase, and 6: Cultural Knowledge.

Unlike Gasman et al.'s (2008) participants, the current study's participants perceived that key people involved in their dissertation experiences received their dissertation topics well, including topics that focused on African American-related issues. The majority of study participants reported being "extremely satisfied" or being "satisfied" when they considered the outcome relative to what they had expected when they entered the doctoral psychology program at their chosen FPCUs and to what they had experienced. Most participants based their level of satisfaction on what they had experienced rather than on what they had expected when they entered their programs,

which suggests that the FPCUs were effective in minimizing situations that perpetuate belonging uncertainty and stereotype threat.

Similar to Hunn-Merriweather's (2008) participants, a common expression among the current study's participants was relating their academic achievement to the family-related and group-related aspects as positioning them to be "role models," "trailblazers," and "examples" for future generations within their families, for other adults, particularly for African American adults, who desire to complete a doctoral psychology program at an FPCU. They indicated that they understood the importance of what they were doing in pursuing and having attained a doctorate in psychology. They specifically related to being a member of their families and being a member of the African American ethnic group. This knowledge and its significance were strong in Themes 5: Completing the Dissertation Phase, 6: Cultural Knowledge, and 7: Self-Actualization.

In contrast to Hall (2010), Theme 7: Self-Actualization emerged, and in self-actualizing, the majority of the current study's study participants expressed that the attaining of the doctorate has fostered additional professional autonomy. Most reported that since they have completed their programs at the FPCUs and attained their doctorates in psychology, they have experienced more upward mobility: "more choices" and "more opportunities." The majority said that they have received "job promotions," "new jobs," or "pay increases since they have attained their doctorates." This finding, in contrast to Columbaro's (2009) and Hall's (2010) findings, suggests that the current study participants' employers did not devalue their degrees even though they had attained them at an FPCU, nor did they view study participants as incompetent.

Theme 1: Selecting an FPCU: Selecting and Executing Suitable Learning Approaches

There has been a surge in African American adults' college enrollment (Census Bureau, 2012, 2014). Hall (2010) found that Black adults who desired a doctorate chose to attend FPCUs several reasons. Reasons Hall's participants gave for choosing FPCUs' learning approaches over TCUs' learning approaches were to avoid having to meet particular gatekeeper measures, and to avoid being placed on the TCUs' long waiting lists even though they had passed the GRE. The current study's participants were specific about which learning approach was the most suitable for them, which was evident in their divisiveness in selecting an FPCU to attend. Good, for example, said "I transferred to [FPCU's name omitted] because I wanted to change my specialization area to organizational psychology."

From this finding, combined with the current study participants' divisiveness when they selected an FPCU to attend, I posit that they began to capitalize on SDL processes, and initiated the SDL process the moment they selected and enrolled at their FPCUs. Spear and Mocker (1981) found that SDL occurred in situations in which the learner controlled both the purposes and processes of learning. Unlike Hall's (2010) participants, the majority of the current study's participants did not mention nor infer that they chose to attain their degrees at an FPCU to avoid having to contend with admissions processes at FPCUs, but rather to be in control of their learning. This suggests that they were self-directed learners.

One's self-directedness is not contingent on the instructional methods or on the subject matter, but rather on who controls the decisions about the purposes and processes of learning (Spear & Mocker, 1981). For example, Forbearance said that the TCUs in her area were only offering the Psy.D credential. Forbearance said, "I really did not want a Psy.D. People thought less of people with a Psy.D." Forbearance mentioned that when researching schools offering the Ph.D. psychology credential, she found her FPCU. Forbearance said that she "requested information" and "spoke with an admissions advisor several months" before she said "yes to the program." Learners' self-directedness is determined by whoever decides: (a) what constitutes success, (b) what methods and resources are used, (c) what should be learned, and (d) who should learn (Spear & Mocker, 1981).

Study participants generally agreed that the structure of the FPCUs were beneficial because it allowed them "accessibility and flexibility" in finishing their doctorates. The FPCUs' approach to learning, according to the data, was suitable as it accommodated the participants' lifestyles and their learning needs. These also were significant factors for why several participants said they would recommend attaining a doctorate from an online program to people they know. This suggests that the participants preferred to be at the center of learning, and they desired more control over when and how they learned.

Knowles (1975) posited that adults, by adapting a self-concept of independence, develop the psychological need to direct themselves. This finding, combined with Knowles's observation, suggest that study participants had a positive self-concept and a

high self-esteem. Empirical findings have indicated that the degree to which graduate students were able to conduct SDL and to self-direct depended largely on their self-concept (see Guglielmino, 1977; Rutland, 1987; Sabbaghian, 1979).

Knowles (1975) postulated that adults have a self-concept of self-sufficiency and sovereignty that stems from an extensive background in life experiences. Globalization exposes individuals to a global community in which they encounter people from not only diverse cultures but who are also directed by cultural roles in which their behaviors have been shaped by their experiences (Dimitrov, 2006; Miller et al., 2011). Because culture develops over time from students' interfaces with other people and with their environments, departments, disciplines, institutional practices, mentors, systemic practices, parents, and other important people in a doctoral student's life can convey culture (Chiu & Chow, 2010; Dimitrov, 2006; Miller, Das, & Chakravarthy, 2011).

Through culture production, individuals make their worlds subjectively meaningful by articulating, typifying, and orienting their experiences (Demerath, 2002). Many participants had either "a bother," "a dad," "a mom," or "a sister" who had attained graduate degrees. Individuals manufacture culture in their quest for significance and material goods (Demerath, 2002). Several were the "first" and "only" person in their immediate families "to attend college" and "to have a degree." Because all participants said that, in their families, education was important, combined with this finding, I also postulate that they were creating and sustaining culture for their families.

Theme 2: Selecting a Specialty Area: Determining Learning Goals

Knowles et al. (2005) posited adults are instinctively driven to learn. Foundational views of SDL imply that learning transcends classrooms (Houle, 1980; Knowles, 1975; Tough, 1979). These were evident in the participants' selecting their specialty areas. This suggests that they were specific about determining their learning goals.

Most participants mentioned that they had "always been interested in psychology," and many had explored other disciplines such as "adult education," "arts," "business," and "political science" before discovering that "psychology" was their "passion." Faith, Forbearance, and Kind described the curiosity as emerging from "observing other people," particularly people in authority roles, and Good, Joy, Love, and Peace described psychology as "something" they have "always" been interested in or wanted to do. For example, Peace said she "always wanted to be a psychologist, but not a clinical psychologist," and agreeing with Peace, Joy said, "Well once I got my bachelor's in political science, I'd actually gone to law school for a semester. I realized it was not my passion . . . psychology was always a love and something I've always enjoyed and wanted to do." This finding suggests that the participants' motivation to learn was intrinsic, which I posit contributed to their academic achievement (Lovitts, 2008).

High-Ph.D.-producing professors at research-intensive TCUs believed that completing the dissertation phase was "a matter of students' passion for their fields or their research topics" (Lovitts, 2008, p. 313). Because they lacked information within their specialty areas, similar to Edmondson et al. (2012) as well as Richardson and Newby's (2006) participants, the current study participants' passion for their specialty

areas propelled their motivation to enroll at their FPCUs in order to explore these areas more deeply. For example, Forbearance said she chose to specialize in general psychology "to get more knowledge on psychology and to do more consultation work." Even though the current study participants' reasons for choosing their particular specialty areas varied, they exhibited high levels of passion for their specialty areas and their dissertation topics.

Most study participants generally agreed that their career plans related to their pursuing a doctorate in psychology. In previous research, doctoral candidates who produced unique dissertations tended to demonstrate a motivation that was driven by an intense intrinsic intuitiveness about their research and a passionate commitment to their work (Lovitts, 2008). The current study was not interested in the distinctiveness of the participants' dissertations, but from the current study's findings, it is clear that the participants were specific about their learning goals. They also were passionate about their achieving their goals, which were evident in their commitment and motivation.

Theme 3: Negotiating Transfer Credits: Determining Learning Needs

This theme emerged when the majority of study participants talked about the FPCUs' requirements for completing their doctoral psychology programs. The literature indicated that over time, changes in the U.S. administration, economy, and population as well as societal changes and high-technology advancements translated into changes in the characteristics of doctorate recipients (NSF, 2012). At time of the current study, some of these changes included a change in the time it takes to complete doctoral study, an increased representation of ethnic minority doctorate recipients, and a reduction in

postdoctorate employment opportunities (NSF, 2012). In order, for federal administrators know what improvements are needed in the U.S. doctoral education system, according to NSF (2012), there is a need to understand how these are connected (NSF, 2012).

In previous research, no researcher addressed the influence of FPCUs' policies for transfer credits (e.g., Hall, 2010), nor had any researcher addressed the impact of transfer credits on the time doctoral students at FPCUs spend completing their programs. Many study participants emphasized their FPCUs' helping them to maximize their credits earned from their previous programs. They specifically related them to their being exempt from having to take some required courses. Peace, for example said, "One other thing, they helped me to finish a little quicker. They accepted the classes I had done [in her graduate programs]."

Good and Kind also emphasized that their FPCUs' acceptance of several of their previously earned credits was "a seller" for them. For them, this meant the willingness of the FPCUs to accept several of their previously earned credits influenced their decision to enroll at their FPCUs. For example, describing the negotiation of her transfer credits, Good asserted, "When I contacted [FPCU's name omitted], the enrollment advisor was just friendly, and then, I had so much transfer credit. She committed to helping me get the maximum . . ., and they were able to do it quickly." Kind also said, "I think what may have been the seller for me was the fact that they were willing to transfer in quite a few number of credit hours from my master's [program]." Data in Table 3 indicated that the majority of participants had transfer credits.

Faith, Kind, and Love had not attained a graduate or an undergraduate degree in psychology. Theoretically, they would not have credits to transfer to their online doctoral psychology programs. Kind was the only participant among these participants to have some of her previous credits transferred. When Kind explained the negotiation of her transfer credits, she said that she was able to transfer the credits because of the "overlap of the training and development" content in the industrial and organizational psychology program at the FPCU and the "training" content covered in the graduate adult education program at her previous school. This finding reveals important information regarding FPCUs and the impact of transfer credit.

First, the literature emphasized that FPCUs allow adults to enter any program of their choice, disregarding the adults' educational backgrounds or qualifications (Hall, 2010; Lynch et al., 2010). It also emphasized the ideology of FPCUs being degree mills that produce and that sell degrees (Hall, 2010). The findings of the current study suggest otherwise. If FPCUs disregarded adults' educational backgrounds, then the FPCUs would have either accepted all participants' previously earned credits, regardless of the discipline in which they were earned, or the FPCUs would not have accepted any credits the participants earned from their previous programs to gain more profits. From this finding, combined with this logic, I posit that the FPCUs included in the current study did consider the participants' educational backgrounds, and they did not sell them degrees.

Second, the data in Table 3 clearly indicated that, with the exception of Kind, the FPCUs accepted the credits that the participants who had attained graduate degrees in psychology earned in their programs. The FPCUs, assuming these participants' previous

course material provided them with essential content-specific knowledge, accepted the credits, and exempted them from having to take similar courses offered at their institutions. Faith and Kind said they had attained a graduate degree in adult education, but Faith was in the clinical psychology program. Kind emphasized that her FPCU related components of the graduate adult education program's content that "overlapped" with the doctoral industrial and organizational psychology content at their institution.

Love and Faith had attained their graduate degrees in "fine arts" and in "adult education." Unlike Kind, there are remarkable differences between their educational backgrounds and their chosen specialty areas even though Love's specialty area was industrial and organizational psychology. This suggests that the FPCUs used the transfer credits to determine the participants' learning needs.

Third, the participants emphasized that they were able to negotiate the transfer of several credits, which exempted them from having to take some required courses. The variations in the number of required courses the FPCUs had exempted the participants from are explained by the differences in the participants' specialty areas. This is evident in Faith, Kind, and Love's cases. The differences in the participants' educational backgrounds, combined with the differences in their specialty areas, suggests that these should have reduced the number of required courses they had to take, and thus, should have reduced the time participants with transfer credits spent completing the doctoral coursework phase.

However, the findings of this study indicated that, on average, participants who had transfer credits spent approximately the same amount time completing the doctoral

coursework phase as participants who did not have transfer credits spent completing the phase. Because Tough (1979) emphasized the role of learners' conscious preplanning in the SDL process, this suggests that these influenced the amount of time the current study's participants had to preplan for the dissertation. Generally, this finding suggests that transfer credit did not influence the time the current study's participants spent completing their programs at their FPCUs.

Theme 4: Completing the Doctoral Coursework Phase: Initiating Learning

Completing the doctoral coursework phase of their programs marked study participants' initiation of learning. The findings indicated that while in this phase, they completed several tasks. They completed some tasks both with and without the help of others. They attended colloquia/residencies, completed electives and required courses, and they completed coursework.

Love emphasized that "four years of your time, if you had no previous courses to substitute, the first four years were actually coursework, and then once [you] finish your coursework, you transition right into the dissertation phase, so that together equals eight years." Faith also "completed an internship." Participants who attended FPCU 1 also completed "a comprehensive exam" once they had completed all their coursework. This finding revealed differences between the FPCUs program designs, but I could not determine whether completing a comprehensive exam prior to entering the dissertation phase was effective.

The majority of study participants perceived that completing their FPCUs' requirements for the doctoral coursework phase had prepared them for the dissertation

phase well. Peace perceived that "the core courses, the projects, the statistics course, and the writing" prepared her well. Peace added, "Another thing that we had at [FPCU's name omitted] was this writing summer class, but it was to support your writing, and so that, too, was very helpful with the dissertation." Love concurred, and added, "They prepared me for the way that I framed my focus. My focus was on x, y, and z, so anything outside of that focus, I heard. I was always flexible within that x, y, z, but it had to stay within that."

Joy explained, "[In the doctoral coursework phase] You're constantly writing, doing posts, and you got papers to write, so I feel like that prepared me. The coursework required me to be scholarly, to research scholarly, [and] to write scholarly, which prepared me for the dissertation." Because they did not emphasize the other requirements, this finding suggests that the FPCUs' required course assignments were the most beneficial for preparing study participants for the dissertation phase. Although Good perceived that completing her FPCU's requirements for the doctoral coursework phase did not prepare her for the dissertation phase well, this may be explained by her preferred learning style.

Knowles et al. (2005) maintained that adults have a need to understand the relevancy of what they are learning. This suggests that their conception of the dissertation was influential in how they approached the doctoral coursework phase, linking and not linking coursework to their dissertation topics. Kind mentioned that it was challenging to select a topic because she was interested in so many things, and Kind changed her topic once. Kind said, "I didn't do that [linked coursework assignments to her dissertation

topic]. I mean I was all over the place," and Kind added, "yes by the time I finished my coursework, I didn't have a lot of research compiled by others that could easily be delved into by Chapter 2, the literature review."

In previous research, some highly self-directed students devised a learning agenda, but they emphasized information that was interesting to them. However, it was not very useful for understanding the topic. This resulted in disordered or incoherent knowledge or misconceptions regarding the subject (Francis & Flanigan, 2012; Lovitts, 2008). This suggests that Kind possessed the highest SDL traits among the participants in this sample even though she did not relate the coursework to her dissertation topic.

Unlike the participants who had a dissertation topic in mind, and linked their doctoral coursework assignments to their topics, Good said, "but I didn't understand. I didn't understand how you can [could] do that, so I didn't do that." Faith added, "I actually didn't know much about it. All I knew is that we were supposed to cover certain information." Joy also explained, "Some of the other parts, I learned going through it." The process of considering relevancy of information was especially important when the participants developed their dissertation topics. Even though the current study was not interested in the quality of study participants' dissertations, according to Lovitts (2008), this process of considering relevancy determined the degree to which they will have produced a distinguished or produced a less distinguished dissertation.

Faculty's role in the socialization of Black online, doctoral psychology students is to help them cultivate the norms and values associated with their roles as professor or as scholar-practitioner (Gasman et al., 2008; Lovitts, 2008). Because several participants

indicated that developing the dissertation topic during this phase of the program and linking coursework to said topic were important, and because one FPCU is now having students to perform these tasks during this phase, I posit that when students perform these tasks are important to their preparation and preplanning for the dissertation. Researchers have maintained that how faculty socialized Black online, doctoral psychology students regarding the norms and values associated with their roles as professors and or as scholar-practitioners is essential for postdoctorate success (Gasman et al., 2008; Lovitts, 2008).

Unlike Peace, Kind said that when she was completing the doctoral coursework phase, the "professors were not suggesting that students link their coursework to their dissertation research studies," nor were they "encouraging students to begin developing or thinking about their topics for the dissertation," which Kind said the FPCU is now doing. Even though Joy attended a different FPCU, chose a different specialty area, and linked her coursework assignments to her dissertation topic, Joy also said, "professors were not encouraging students to begin developing or thinking about their topic for the dissertation or suggesting that students link their coursework to their dissertation research studies." Online doctoral psychology programs aim to provide online learners with the information and the expertise necessary for their professional development, and because they "serve the important purpose of socializing students into distinct occupational roles" (Gasman et al., 2008, p. 130), this finding might explain the differences in how the current study's participants experienced the dissertation phase.

Richardson (2010) concluded that for ethnic minority students, differences in how the students conceived learning explained the variances in the students' approaches to

learning. The current study's participants generally acknowledged that completing an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU required more discipline and more self-direction compared to what they had experienced when they attended TCUs. The majority of participants indicated that, at doctoral coursework phase of their programs, they understood that the dissertation capstone would consist of writing five chapters on a topic. This suggests that they had a working knowledge of the components necessary for completing their dissertation capstone research studies.

The findings indicated that, overall, the participants' perceptions of the dissertation capstone were similar. For some participants, their understanding informed how they approached the doctoral coursework phase, linking and not linking coursework to their dissertation topics. However, the findings suggest that they did not connect this tool to the norms of the discipline. Because only one participant's understanding of dissertation capstone illuminated its relevancy for doctoral students, combined with similarities in how the other participants conceived it, this suggests that they did not benefit much from FPCUs' colloquia/residencies.

The current study's participants performed a lot of work on their own, taking charge in and responsibility for their own learning and performance. Doing this, similar to Clark's (2013) participants, increased their learning and self-efficacy. The majority of participants indicated that they understood that the completing their programs would require them to complete the doctoral coursework phase and the dissertation phase. Anticipating the dissertation phase, many participants considered what their dissertation topics would be, and they linked their coursework assignments to said topic.

This finding, combined with known characteristics for self-directed learners, suggests that these were self-directed learners, and they initiated learning with and without the help of other people. Because preplanning is characteristic of self-directed learners (Knowles, 1975; Tough, 1979), completing the doctoral coursework phase also informed the participants' time to preplan for the dissertation experience. For example, Forbearance, Joy, Love, and Peace said that they "were linking their coursework" to their dissertations or "using those papers and those ideas to get closer" to what they wanted to write about for their dissertations.

Joy added, "I took a qualitative course because I knew I wanted to do qualitative research, but I took that as an elective, on purpose. That class really helped me because it required me to write Chapter 3." Joy said that taking the qualitative analysis course was very helpful because she had her "research design all laid out, already written" for her dissertation. Only a few participants said they did not link the writing assignments for their coursework to their dissertation topics, which suggests that most participants were thinking forward. Even though all study participants completed the dissertation, this finding might explain some of the variation in their experiences of the dissertation phase.

Table 3 indicated that the time study participants had spent completing the doctoral coursework phase ranged from 20 months to 48 months. This finding suggests that on average, they had spent 37 months completing the doctoral coursework phase, respectively. The differences, combined with their educational backgrounds, suggest that their chosen specialty area may explain the variance in the times they spent in this phase.

However, the data also indicated that the time participants who transferred credits spent in the doctoral coursework phase of their programs was similar to the time participants who did not transfer credits spent in this phase of their programs. This finding also suggests that participants' transfer credit and lack thereof has a role in the time they had to prepare for the dissertations. This could be attributed to the relationship between transfer credits and course exemptions. Generally, this suggests that participants who had transfer credits will have had less time to prepare for their dissertations.

Theme 5: Completing the Dissertation Phase: Assessing Learning Outcomes

The dissertation capstone is what informs graduate students' transition into the role the independent researcher (Lovitts, 2008). This suggests that completing the dissertation capstone phase was evident of study participants' assessment of learning outcomes. Demerath (1993) maintained that the regularity, consistency, and power of people's experiences determined the significance of the experience.

None of the participants reported being "dissatisfied" or being "extremely dissatisfied" when they considered the outcome relative to what they had expected when they entered the doctoral psychology program at their chosen FPCU and to what they had experienced. For example, Faith said, "So when I say I'm really extremely satisfied being where I am, it's essentially because the struggles that I've gone through. I see that I have really overcome and finished. It's really an awesome spirit." Agreeing with Faith, Forbearance added, "I am extremely satisfied, because I completed my Ph.D. I have my diploma in hand, on my mirror, so I'm extremely satisfied. I mean I went through all

kinds of things." Forbearance concluded, "Yeah, in the program, I went through many trials and tribulations"

However, even though Joy and Peace related their levels of satisfaction on their "smooth" experiences, their levels of satisfaction were not the same. Peace said that she was "extremely satisfied." Joy was "satisfied" with what she experienced at her FPCU. Joy said,

> I was just incredibly blessed [shown favor by God; endowed with supernatural ability and supernatural protection] in that going through the program was incredibly smooth. My classes were smooth. The dissertation process was smooth. I couldn't have asked for a better experience.

Moreover, while the most participants based their levels of satisfaction on their experiences, a few based their levels of satisfaction on their expectations. This suggests that, when they considered the outcome relative to what they had expected when they entered the doctoral psychology program at their chosen FPCU and to what they had experienced, all participants based their levels of satisfaction on the regularity, consistency, and power their experiences throughout their programs. This also suggests that the regularity, consistency, and power their experiences throughout their programs explain variations in their levels of satisfaction, which supports Demerath (1993).

Data displayed in Table 4 indicated that the time study participants spent completing the dissertation phase ranged from 18 months to 72 months, which suggests that, on average, they spent 48 months completing their dissertation research studies. The data also indicated that the total time participants spent completing their FPCUs' program

requirements for degree attainment ranged from 5 to 10 years, which suggests that, on average, they spent 6 years and 7 months completing their programs at their FPCUs. Lovitts (2008) maintained that completing the dissertation process is the most difficult experience a doctoral student will endure. Some participants said that the FPCU's doctoral coursework phase requirements might have been more effective for preparing them for the dissertation experience had the FPCUs curriculum been designed so that dissertation topic development would be introduced during the coursework phase of their programs.

Participants who linked their coursework to their dissertation topic indicated that doing this allowed them to have some preliminary research on their topics in place when they eventually reached the dissertation phase of their programs. Findings of this study indicated that on average, the participants who linked and the participants who did not link their coursework assignments to their dissertation topics spent approximately the same amount of time completing the dissertation capstone phase of their programs. They also indicated that they spent approximately the same amount of time completing their FPCUs' program requirements for degree attainment, which suggest that linking and not linking coursework assignments to their dissertation topics during the doctoral coursework phase did not significantly influence the amount time participants spent completing their dissertation capstone research studies, and completing their programs.

Collectively, study participants who used quantitative methods spent 22 years in their programs, and study participants who used qualitative methods spent 17 years and 6 months in their programs. This suggests that, on average, while study participants who

used quantitative methods spent 7 years and 3 months completing their programs, study participants who used qualitative methods spent 5 years and 8 months completing their programs. This also suggests that, on average, study participants who chose to conduct quantitative studies spent an additional 4 years and 4 months in their programs. Because this averages out to be one additional year and 5 additional months per participant who chose to use quantitative methods, combined with the difference in time spent completing their programs for participants who used qualitative methods, I posit that study participants' chosen methodology influenced the time they spent completing their programs.

When transitioning into the role of the independent researcher, students should be (a) responsible enough to develop an idea, (b) driven to follow through on that idea, (c) able to locate necessary resources with occasional interaction with their mentors, and (d) able to produce an independent research project (Lovitts, 2008). Study participants said that their FPCUs' requirements for completing the doctoral coursework phase prepared them for the dissertation phase well. They appeared to have based this evaluation on their writing assignments during the coursework phase because many said that completing the writing assignments prepared them well for the research and writing portions of the dissertation. Most indicated that they understood the mechanics of the dissertation particularly that it consisted of their writing five chapters on a topic of their choice, but only Kind said, "I was now going to be the one doing the research, to compile necessary scholarly information or literature review for my study."

While Kind did not mention writing five chapters on a topic, Kind concluded, “So it was spirited the practical side of all this stuff that I had learned in the prior three years.” This finding suggests that even though the majority of participants did not understand the relevancy of the dissertation, they still managed to complete the dissertation phase of their programs because they were self-directed learners. This is explained by adults’ natural proclivity towards performing tasks (Knowles, 1975; Knowles et al., 2005). Guglielmino (1977) found that self-directed learners are distinguished from other learners because of their “openness to learning opportunities,” “self-concept as an effective learner,” “initiative and independence in learning,” “informed acceptance of responsibility for one’s own learning,” “love of learning,” “creativity,” “future orientation,” and “ability to use basic study skills and problem-solving skills” (pp. 57-69).

Because study participants were intrinsically motivated, citing that human behavior was “something” they had “always” found fascinating or that psychology was “something” they had “always desired to do,” they used their creativity to assist them with completing their dissertation research studies and finishing their programs. Torrance and Mourad (1978) found that creative experiences and achievements were associated with students’ readiness for using SDL. Knowles et al. (2005) maintained that adults have a proclivity towards solving problems, which suggests that creativity was an essential aspect of their aptitude to change into independent researcher role, confirming findings from (Lovitts, 2008). Consequently, I posit that study participants’ creativity helped them to develop instincts for solving problems (Lovitts, 2008; Torrance & Mourad, 1978), and

this is explained by the finding of their feeling certain that they belonged in the doctoral psychology programs at their FPCUs.

Because they were members of an ethnic and racial minority group, they had various identity choices beyond their commitment to their Black racial group, such as their professional groups (Baysu et al., 2011). As Black students who were pursuing a field that non-Black individuals have historically dominated, and at an institution characterized by high student attrition and low graduation rates, the majority of participants did not experience stereotype threat or belonging uncertainty. This finding suggests that they used an assimilated identity strategy. Using this strategy, they were able to deem the negative stereotypes as being irrelevant to them (Baysu et al., 2011).

In dismissing the negative stereotypes, study participants esteemed self as academically compatible, capable, and fit as other students. For example, when speaking on stereotype threat and belonging uncertainty, Faith who was older said, “They didn’t bother me. I was pursuing what I wanted to pursue, and [it] had nothing to do with them or [with] what research says.” Joy agreed, and said, “and [it] wasn’t even like, ‘what, Black women don’t do this,’ and Peace added, “I’ve always been as if I do belong. I never felt insecure about what my ambition should be, or what field I should be pursuing.” I posit that their use of an assimilated identity strategy informed their tenacity in overcoming and weathering through the challenges that they encountered while completing this phase of their programs, and ultimately completing their programs.

Study participants’ positive self-concept and high self-esteem allowed them to protect self against the effects of stereotype threat and belonging uncertainty (Baysu et

al., 2011; Cokley, 2002). Demerath (1993) posited that it is changes in knowledge and not changes in the percept that underpins a person's response to phenomena. This suggests that study participants used the knowledge conveyed from their parents and other significant Black people in their lives that said they were just as capable and just as competent as other students are. I posit that this knowledge formed the basis of their self-understanding, and it influenced their feeling certain that they belonged in the doctoral psychology programs at their FPCUs, despite the stereotypes associated with Black people, particularly Black students.

The findings revealed variations in study participants' experiences from the time they reached ABD status to obtaining final approval of their final study varied, but they also revealed that they benefited when their dissertation chairs/mentors' mentoring styles were proactive. For example, Love said, "He established himself as a great leader, and I allowed myself to be led by him." Kind said, "He questioned me on certain things to make sure that I was clear on what I was doing and telling me what he understood my writing to say." Peace agreed, and Peace added, "I wouldn't send up my papers unless, in my mind, I thought they were perfect, so she would get on me often. She would call me [and] text me."

In previous research, using a proactive advising approach with ethnic minority students aided the students' engagement and retention (Museus & Ravello, 2010; Richardson, 2010). Consistently with Demerath (1993) and Dimitrov's (2006) postulations, this motivated them to comply with the FPCUs norms and to perform

expectedly. Their internal or moral conviction to do so explains these associative-affect and ego-relevant affect responses (Demerath, 1993; Dimitrov, 2006).

Because group decision-making is characteristic of African American culture (Dimitrov, 2006), when the norms guiding their relationships with their dissertation chair were ambiguous, and there were no sanctions, they became frustrated. Faith and Good were oriented towards this type of collective agency, and as such, this explains their frustration. For example, Faith said, "but I believe we . . . , each person has a chair that is paid, and they should have been *leading* us. They should have been *guiding* us. I'm not saying that they should be doing our work, but the major things." This suggests that they were more extrinsically motivated, which is explained by African American cultural norms that view people in authority, such as their dissertation chairs, as an authority figure, and as such, they are perceived as fulfilling their duty (Dimitrov, 2006).

The findings also revealed differences and similarities in study participants' dissertation topics. They also indicated that they used a variety of research methodologies to find answers to their questions pertaining to their topics. The differences and similarities in their dissertation topics and research methodologies are explained by differences and similarities in their personalities. For example, while most chose to focus on work-related issues, Kind was the only participant who chose to focus on a topic for the sake of exploring the topic, and only Faith and Joy said that they chose to conduct research concerning African American-related issues.

Many agreed that the key people involved in their dissertation experiences "were receptive" of their dissertation topics, but the majority did not view their dissertation

chairs or committee members as their mentors based on their definitions of what a mentor is and of what a mentor does. This is explained by self's inherent socialization towards conformity (Dimitrov, 2006). However, because the key people involved in their dissertation experiences "were receptive" of their dissertation topics, the participants perceived that their dissertation chairs and committee members cared. Again, this is informed by the group decision-making characteristic of African American culture (Dimitrov, 2006)

The receptiveness of their dissertation topics by the key people involved in their dissertation experience, for them, meant that they could trust their dissertation chairs and committee members with their Black self. Because most preferred to self-identify as Black, as shown in Table 2, trusting self with others was a crucial component for their collaborations with their dissertation chairs and committee members. Being able to collaborate with people they could trust was essential for helping them to assess the quality of the knowledge (Garrison, 1997; Knowles et al., 2005; Lovitts, 2008). This finding suggests that despite their knowledge of stereotypes associated with Black people in their ethnic and racial group, they did not perceive the experiences of continuous criticism and failure that accompany the dissertation process as threats to the self.

Generally, study participants agreed that even though they chose to pursue a field that non-Black individuals have historically dominated, they, as a Black student, felt that they belonged in their particular doctoral psychology program at their particular FPCU. This is explained by their associating the key people's receptiveness of their dissertation topics with these people caring, and this association, combined with their belonging

certainty informed their ability to trust self with others, despite serotypes associated with both Black people and White people. Therefore, I posit that, collectively, these also informed the evaluation of their assessment of the learning outcomes, which they described with two expressions: “extremely satisfied” and “satisfied.”

Theme 6: Cultural Knowledge: Locating Learning Materials and Resources

Although study participants agreed that enduring the process of completing their online doctoral psychology programs was a grueling experience, the majority emphasized how they would not have been able to endure the completion of their programs without the support from some of their family members, friends, or other significant people in their lives. For example, Good said, “My family telling me, ‘don’t quit’ like, ‘keep going.’ My husband could understand because he was also pursuing a doctorate. . . . That made a difference.” Forbearance, speaking of her “dissertation buddy,” said, “We [she and her dissertation buddy] helped each other. . . . We pushed each other.” African American families and African American students are a close-knit collectivist group of people who value kinship bonds, religion, education, and work (Hunter & Schmidt, 2010; Kelly, 2012; Rochon, 1997).

African American families are able to maintain stability and strength from supporting these values, and being able to adapt family roles when necessary (Rochon, 1997; Watson & Protinsky, 1988). For example, Joy described how she “needed support” from her “family” and “people around her,” such as her in-laws, which Joy said, “would keep my girls for an extra couple of hours because they knew I had work to do. They would cook for us; sometimes bringing me food. I needed that support.” Peace added,

"One thing that really helped me was my mom is retired now, so while I was writing, she would proofread my work, so I finished." Because Knowles (1975) maintained that "identifying human and material resources for learning" (p. 18) was an important part of the SDL process, this finding suggests that study participants viewed these individuals as useful resources.

Their views of these individuals as useful resources are explained by the collectivist nature of the African American ethnic group (Rochon, 1997; Watson & Protinsky, 1988). Joy and Love's statements offer other examples this concept. For example, Love concluded, "So the bottom line is that having my employer to pay for the bulk of my tuition, to have a status of ABD, all but dissertation, was not an option for me." Joy emphasized, "I knew it was some kind of a calling, so I think I drew upon my ancestors and all the people who came before me. I felt like it was something that I needed to do for them."

Collectivist cultures, such as African American culture, also value the interest of the group (Chui & Chow, 2010; Dimitrov, 2006; Miller et al., 2011; Rochon, 1997). Achievement, in African American culture, is viewed as group success (Dimitrov, 2006). This suggests that study participants' cultural knowledge informed their locating learning materials and resources because study participants viewed some of their family members, friends, and other significant people in their lives as useful resources. This is explained by what is known of African Americans' cultural norms and cultural values.

Because Knowles (1975) maintained that "identifying human and material resources for learning" (p. 18) was an important part of the SDL process, I posit that they

began this process when they identified family members, friends, and other significant people in their lives who could and would be useful resources. In this light, maintaining African Americans' cultural norms and cultural values and group-commitment can be viewed as learning resources. They can also be viewed as motivators for achievement.

Many participants agreed that they and God were the most significant factors that contributed to their finishing their degrees at the FPCUs. For example, Forbearance saying, "My will; my determination to complete it through all obstacles, real or imagined," and Joy adding, "It's a choice that you make. You make the choice. You make the choice to do it." Kind concluded, "I find it hard to not finish something I've started . . ., and I decided to do it, it must be finished . . ., that's a part of my personality. To finish, it was a *must*. . . . I did it," and Peace said, "It wasn't [FPCU's name omitted]. It was just me, my ambition to complete, so it wasn't an option of ABD for me. I personally would never be happy with myself if I didn't complete my Ph.D."

Their statements suggests that they would have gone to any length to complete their programs, and thus, it is plausible that their drive to finish their programs enhanced as well as heighten their willingness to locate other learning materials and resources. For example, Peace added, "That was my ambition, online or brick-and-mortar. There was never a perception that I would not achieve . . . , would not have finished it." From this finding, combined with study participants' statements, I postulate that their commitment to self was also essential for their completing their programs.

Study participants' perceiving themselves as the most significant factors that contributed to their finishing their degrees at their FPCUs suggests that how they defined,

identified, and understood themselves were essential to their academic achievement. Because Knowles (1975) postulated that adults have a self-concept of self-sufficiency and sovereignty that stems from an extensive background in life experiences, their statements also suggest that the conclusion they made regarding their self, particularly as learners, prior to entering their doctoral programs at the FPCUs came into these programs with them. Other findings have indicated that highly self-directed graduate students' demonstrated a positive self-concept (see Guglielmino, 1977; Rutland, 1987; Sabbaghian, 1979). Findings from the current study, combined with previous research findings and the participants' statements, suggest that they not only had a positive self-concept that followed them throughout their experience.

The findings also suggest that study participants' self-understanding enhanced their self-directedness. Guglielmino (1977) found that, unlike other learners, self-directed learners embraced opportunities for learning, viewed themselves as capable learners, managed their own learning, and enjoyed learning, and they were inventive preplanners and efficient problem solvers (pp. 57-69). I posit that these traits influenced their ability to locate the learning materials and resources necessary for them to complete the programs. This is explained by both study participants' passion for psychology and their dissertation topics combined with their commitment to the cultural norms and cultural values of the African American group.

Chiu & Chow (2010) maintained that cultural values orient members of a given culture to the culture, and they inform the characteristics, effects, and principles a student qualifies as important (Chow, 2010). For example, Faith said, "I would be on the prayer

line [In Christiandom refers to intercessory communication to God on the behalf of someone else] with them [women at her church] when, you know, I felt like I lost all hope in the system and everything." Love said, "Truly, my religious and spiritual base was a strong influence as well," and Joy said that her faith [In King James's Version of the Bible, Hebrews 11:1 states, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen."] helped her to complete her program. Joy added, "So I had to put it in God's hands, and He would be the One writing. I couldn't have done it without God. I could not have done it without Him being there every step of the way."

People's cultural values are also channels for their beliefs, and they are frameworks for their attitudes and needs (Demerath, 2002; Dimitrov, 2006). For example, Love, unlike the other participants, also related his knowledge of how civil rights activists responded to adversity to his ability to finish his degree at his FPCU, particularly overcoming the encounter with his first dissertation chair. Love said, "It was purely the harder the water that they push on me, the harder I push to move forward. The harder they push me back, the harder I move forward." Love added, "So my resilience was not completely broken, but it was a challenge."

Because it is possible to view the maintenance of African Americans' cultural norms and cultural values as a learning resource, study participants' commitment to the cultural norms and cultural values of their ethnic group explains how maintaining these was essential for many study participants' finishing their degrees. For example, Love also said, "But the part of me that I, I believe I can accredit it to is being born in the 60s," and Love added that, "being born in the 60s, we were culturally taught by our surroundings

that we had to be twice as good or twice as better than the White students [were].” Love also said, “We had to work twice as hard, which means that despite whatever hurdle or barrier that we are confronted with, we have to press on and maintain and continue and sustain ourselves,” and Love concluded, “I believe that’s what was working as an underlining factor.” Peace offered another example. Peace said, “I come from a family where education was very, very important,” and Peace added, “whether you decided you wanted to do a trade, or you wanted to earn a degree, graduating from high school was just a stepping stone to further your education.”

Knowles et al. (2005) postulated that adults’ motivation to learn derives from their personal need to learn, but needs are only a representative of an individual’s values because the person’s desire is unfulfilled (Demerath, 2002; Dimitrov, 2006). In contrast to Love, Peace’s perception was different. Peace said, “I was brought up in a culture where education is considered the ladder to success . . . . We were raised where the sky was the limit, and culturally, we were taught that you are just as valuable as the other person [is],” and Peace added, “We were never made to feel inferior. We were told, ‘You decide what you want to do, and how you are accepted and being treated.’ That’s how we were raised, culturally.”

Love and Peace’s ages suggested that they were born in the 1960s. Faith and Forbearance ages also suggested that they born in the 1960s. All preferred to identify self as “Black.” Neither Faith nor Forbearance referenced these values although when explaining the most significant factor that contributed to her finishing her degree at her FPCU, Forbearance said, “my determination to complete it through all obstacles, real or

imagined." In America, the 1960s were characterized by racial and social unrest in which Black people experienced many challenges in trying to gain civil rights.

During this time, through the philosophy and stance of groups, such as the Black Panther Party, Black people embraced a new definition for what Black meant (Rochon, 1997). No longer did Black depict that which was inferior or substandard (Rochon, 1997), but Black meant pride, respect, and strength ("Black-power"; Rochon, 1997, p. 60). These values apparently influenced study participants' dogmas, priorities, motives, and eventually their behaviors and their realities (Chiu & Chow, 2010; Demerath, 2002).

The differences in the participants' attitudes and beliefs are explained by differences in their personalities as well as differences in the sematic meaning they attached to their experiences as they were reared during this era. This happens because of associative affect, and because of the tendency of African Americans to view the entity of self as an extension of the group or others (Dimitrov, 2006). Demerath (2002) posited that knowledge-based affect, ego-relevant affect, or associative affect could emerge as evaluations that can underwrite the construction of semantic meanings, and these meanings will stabilize over time. Because study participants were inherently socialized towards self-direction, I also posit that this cultural knowledge was influential in their locating learning materials and resources, and it was a contributor to their finishing their degrees at their FPCUs.

Knowles (1975) maintained that highly self-directed learners specified relevant portions of the resources. From this stance, locating learning materials and resources was essential for study participants completing their programs. Joy, for example, said, "I used

the library a lot. I used the writing center maybe once," and similar to Joy, Faith said, "I submitted my work to the writing center once." Faith added, "I used the librarian sometimes when I couldn't find what I wanted, or when I saw an article somewhere else and was unable to get it, or [I] asked them for general questions" Peace agreed, "I had my librarian. She was very, very helpful with helping me with researching and where to look." Because of Knowles's postulation and the participants' statements, I posit that study participants were highly self-directed learners, which is explained by how they were socialized by African American group members.

Self-directed learners have the aptitude to oversee their learning projects (Boyer et al., 2014; Garrison, 1997; Edmondson et al., 2012). This is evident in several participants' emphasis on other learning materials and resources they located on their own. For example, Joy and Peace used qualitative data analysis software to assist them with analyzing their data. Forbearance said, "I got a tutor from my son's tutoring services, so I got a writing tutor for two weeks. . . . She *helped* me. She was a *writing* tutor. . . . The writing tutor helped me see *how* I wasn't answering the question."

Similarly, Good said that, after "wasting a year trying to write Chapter 2 first," she hired a dissertation coach. Good said that the dissertation coach assured her that "it would be okay to for [her] to write Chapter 1 first," and Good added, "All we talked about is how I can accelerate my dissertation. So my coach and I worked a lot around how to organize my life, so that I could have the time that I needed to work on it." This suggests that while study participants were specifying relevant portions of the learning

materials and recourse provided by their FPCUs, they were also determining their learning needs on their own.

Theme 7: Self-Actualization: Autonomy

Humanistic philosophy emphasizes that human beings innately have a proclivity towards self-actualization, and it assumes that individuals determine their own realities (Elias & Merriam, 1980). However, the discovery of one's self is among the top psychosocial developmental tasks that individuals face (Santrock, 2009). While self refers "to all the characteristics of a person" (Santrock, 2009, p. 398), one's self-concept, self-understanding, and personality develop in the context of the culture and family system in which he or she lives. As the person matures, he or she is open to the prospect of a possible self (Santrock, 2009).

Many participants described psychology as "something" they had "always" been interested in or "wanted to do," and several described the curiosity as emerging from their observations of other people, particularly people in authority roles. This finding suggests that all participants possessed a general fascination with human behavior. Because Santrock (2009) maintained that as the person matures, he or she is open to the prospect of a possible self, I posit that the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who attained their degrees at an FPCU is self-actualization.

From the findings, it is clear that the pulls of their curiosity, desire, and interest eventually compelled them to fulfill or satisfy these aspects of self. They determined that an online learning approach would accommodate their lifestyles and would meet their learning needs, selected an FPCU that was suitable for them, and enrolled in their

particular doctoral psychology programs at their particular FPCUs. Doing these, they began the journey of fulfilling and satisfying these aspects of self. I posit also that their cultural knowledge informed these phenomena because African American culture has been articulated as a way of living that accentuates ability, creativity, invention, originality, and skillfulness (Rochon, 1997, p. 66).

Culture informs the ways and forms of thinking, believing, acting, and the other things passed down from one generation to the next (Santrock, 2009, p. 580). Most study participants had a parent or a sibling who attained an advanced degree, and others were first-generation college students. For example, while Joy said, "In my immediate family, I am the only one with a terminal degree. Both of my parents and my brother have master's degrees, so that's standard to at least have an advanced degree," Peace added, "My mom had completed her Ph.D. in education, and my dad, he was an engineer. My sisters and brothers are master's level. One sister is a doctor, pediatrician." Demerath (2002) postulated that through cultural production, individuals make their worlds subjectively meaningful by typifying their experience.

This, typifying of experience that accompanies cultural production suggests that study participants were either sustaining or creating culture. For example, Peace added, "I have one son. He's 22, shooting for his MBA this year from [PWI's name omitted]," but Good said, "When I entered the doctoral psychology program, neither of my parents had attended college." Study participants created and sustained culture through directing the self in and through self-actualization.

Study participants selected and executed a suitable learning approach, and they developed their own learning goals (Knowles, 1975). They, while working with their FPCUs, determined their learning needs, and initiated learning (Knowles, 1975). They also they assessed learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975). Their selecting a suitable FPCU, selecting a specialty area, negotiating transfer credit, completing the doctoral coursework phase, and completing the dissertation phase informed these experiences.

Study participants' understanding of the importance of what they were doing in pursuing and having attained a doctorate in psychology advanced their ability and self-efficacy. For example, Good said, "Attaining a doctorate in psychology means self-actualization because you've reach a goal you set for yourself." Joy said, "My daughters were the whole reason why I was even getting my doctorate, anyway: to be a role model, trailblazer, to show them that you can do anything that you want to do." Joy continued, "and to put myself in a situation where I open opportunities for myself, professionally, so that I have more opportunities to spend more time with them." Joy also added, "I can decide what, how, and when I want to work, and that's what I wanted to do." In this sense, having this knowledge, fortified their ability to successfully direct and guide self in the completion and through the completion of their programs.

Consequently, having this knowledge also facilitated as well as sustained their motivation to finish their degrees. Because of the tendency of collectivistic cultures to view achievement in terms of group success (Dimitrov, 2006), this, eventually keeps the achievement in constant movement from one generation and from one individual to the next. For example, while Faith concluded, "So I, you know, have to do things, not only

for me…, ascertain. Achieve not only for myself, but also for my nieces and nephews who look up to me," Kind stated, "I did it. I finished." For Kind, this meant as a "full-time employee and a single parent who came from a blue-collar family."

From Knowles (1975) and Knowles et al. (2005), I postulate that study participants' cultural knowledge also enhanced their efficacy expectancies because these phenomena are explained by people's tendency to make their worlds subjectively meaningful by typifying their experience, which occurs during cultural production (Demerath, 2002). Faith also offered another example when she said, "I can be a great hope. I can be a mentor. I can be somebody's example. Somebody can look at me and say, 'If she can do it, I can do it.' While she added, "I can be a [role] model for younger African American children," Faith also concluded, "And that makes me feel wonderful. That makes me feel great that the Lord has blessed me with the stuff I could accomplish."

The majority of participants perceived that their self was the most significant factor in their finishing their degrees at their FPCUs. Chiu and Chow (2010) explained that this happens because the beliefs students hold about their competence regarding the task and the subjective value students attach to the task influence their expectancy beliefs. For example, Peace said, "I personally would never be happy with myself if I didn't complete my Ph.D. That was my ambition, online or brick-and-mortar." Several participants explicitly and implicitly said ABD status was unacceptable to the self, which suggests that they were highly motivated to prevent ABD status from becoming their realities. This implies that they were highly identified with their academics.

Pizzolato (2006) maintained that safeguarding their self-esteem, combined with reward seeking, would have increased their motivation because performing poorly would have been punishing. Because ego-relevant affect describes a student's "response to change in the perception of one's self" (Demerath, 1993, pp. 136-137), I posit that knowing that not finishing their degrees would have meant that they did not accomplish their goals advanced their ability and self-efficacy, and their motivation was a means of safeguarding their self-esteem. This suggests that this level of accomplishment fed their self-esteem and self-understanding.

This level of accomplishment also promoted personal growth while, to some degree, it provoked them to particularly to want to achieve more and generally for the common good of society. For example, while Good said, "But there is more you feel you need to achieve," Love agreed, and said, "I've accomplished a dissertation, and I've accomplished this Ph.D." Love concluded, "As a Black person, I feel that there is more that I need to do to be contributing to mankind. Otherwise, it's a waste of my time. It's a waste of God's time," and while Forbearance partially agreed, Forbearance explained, "That [social change] was what my whole aim was from the beginning of the program to the end. It was to somehow impact society." Forbearance added, "The part of society that I was able to impact or touch or just give a glimmer of something different. Like to make them see what I see and see it clearer." Therefore, I posit that study participants' gain in a greater sense of accomplishment cultivated a deeper level of group-commitment, and thus increased their group-esteem and cultural capital.

The gain in study participants' sense of accomplishment also cultivated a more concise understanding of self and self-commitment. For example, while Joy said, "It's validating because I already knew this is what I was supposed to do. It was something God laid on my heart a long time ago, and so it was validating to finish," Peace ascertained, "I don't see any limitations to a person achieving their highest potential: if they have the drive; if they continue; if they really want it. They gotta have the ambition, too." Kind agreed and concluded, "When I walked across the stage this time, it was different from the times that I walked across the stage. I knew that I had finished what I started. Education is great. It is something that I have accomplished." However, the accomplishment, in itself, created a broader range for self: more autonomous and more actualized compared to how the participants conceived themselves before completing their doctorates.

Most participants described how difficult it was for them to create and to sustain culture through directing the self in and through actualizing the completion of an online doctoral program, and in a field that has historically been dominated by non-Black individuals and at an institution that is among the institutions characterized by high student attrition rates. Their common perception was that what they had accomplished outweighed the challenges. For example, Love said, "I didn't concern myself with some of the challenges at the institution because, to me, God told me to do what I am doing or did, and so I did what God told me to do." Love added, "I achieved what *God* [emphasis added] asked me to do, so I am extremely satisfied with doing what God asked me to do."

Study participants recognized that completing an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU was challenging, but having developed more independence and a lesser need to depend on others to direct them, they gained a more concise concept of themselves. Their accomplishment provided more autonomy, which is explained as a personal gain through experiencing increased opportunities both personally and professionally. These speak to the fact that their experience of academic achievement is gain for the self that has created new cultural norms and or values, or has sustained old and or current ones through the experience in and of itself.

This gain in self-actualization has contributed to more autonomy. Such a level of accomplishment has cultivated a more concise understanding of self. It has created a broader range for self: more actualized and more autonomous, compared to how they conceived themselves before completing their doctorates. Collectively, these suggest that study participants not only determined their realities, but they also created new ones that are informed by more autonomy and more freedom.

Limitations of the Study

Some limitations to trustworthiness arose from the execution of the study. The study was limited to seven individuals who completed their doctorates at two FPCUs. Most participants were female. The participants' specialties were limited to clinical psychology, educational psychology, general psychology, and industrial and organization psychology, and most participants had attained their doctorates in industrial and organizational psychology. This excluded other specialty areas. In addition, I had

significant control over the data analysis and the research design, and my perceptions inherently influenced the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

The strengths and the limitations of the current study as well as the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 are the basis for which recommendations for future research are being made. FPCUs have been successful with capturing the ethnic minority adult market. Many Black adults prefer to enroll at FPCUs (Hall, 2010). Because much of the research has focused on Black doctoral and graduate students attending TCUs, researchers know relatively nothing about Black students who finished their degrees at FPCUs.

Findings from this phenomenological study fill some gaps in the literature regarding the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at FPCUs. This study's findings reveal information about how Black students successfully complete an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU and what factors contributed to their finishing their degrees at FPCUs. They also provide an in-depth understanding of the meaning of academic achievement for a group of Black doctorate recipients who attained their degrees through an FPCU.

This study is limited because I employ a phenomenological design to explore the effectiveness of FPCUs' doctoral psychology programs. I only include the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU, and the factors that contributed to these students finishing their degrees at their FPCUs. I

narrowly focus on the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate in psychology at their FPCUs.

Because it is a phenomenological study, it only includes the narratives of a group of seven study participants who had attained their degrees from only two of the FPCUs mentioned in Chapter 2. The majority are women. Most had attained their degrees from one FPCU. Many had attained their doctorates in industrial and organizational psychology.

This study indicates that following the SMR opposed to following a dissertation checklist appeared to have assisted the participants more by providing the participants an apparently less stressful and a smoother dissertation experience, saving them time and money. It also indicates that participants who had to complete a comprehensive exam experienced an apparently less stressful and a smoother dissertation experience. Most participants perceived that the FPCUs' requirements for the doctoral coursework phase of their programs prepared them for the dissertation phase well, but most participants experienced challenges at the dissertation phase. Several participants indicated that their FPCU either had not properly trained their dissertation chairs to sit in this role, had not ensured their dissertation chairs was familiarized the FPCU's dissertation process protocol, or had uprooted their dissertation chairs, which cost them to waste additional time and money.

The majority of participants inferred that they did not fully understand the relevancy of the dissertation, which suggests that their FPCUs had not socialized them, fully. Because of these findings, I am making the following recommendations for future

research. If executed, they could help researchers separate variables that might improve models for FPCUs' online doctoral psychology programs, particularly for Black students:

- I recommend that future studies include a more diverse sample, consisting of a more comparable ratio of female and male graduates from a broader range of domains within the psychology discipline, and from more FPCUs.
- I recommend further cross-sectional research to explore the procedural practices surrounding the formation and selection of dissertation committee members to assist with developing more cost and time efficient procedures.
- I recommend that future qualitative research focus on exploring these issues with FPCU faculty and staff to assist with gaining an in-depth understanding of how FPCUs are preparing faculty to sit as dissertation chairs, particularly to work with Black online doctoral psychology students.
- I recommend future focus group research to explore more deeply how FPCUs are preparing Black online, doctoral psychology students for their transitions to their new roles as independent researchers, particularly focusing on their experiences during the doctoral coursework phase, and on their residency experiences.
- I recommend that future longitudinal research focus on exploring these phenomena more.

Implications for Positive Social Change

There has been a surge in African American adults' college enrollment (Census Bureau, 2012, 2014). Researchers know relatively nothing about how Black students successfully complete an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU and what factors contribute to their finishing their degrees at FPCUs. One-half of them will not complete their programs, although they will have amassed a large amount of student loan debt (Di Pierro, 2012; Hall, 2010). Despite having attained doctorates, Black FPCU graduates experience student loan default more frequently than Black TCU graduates do (Hall, 2010).

Graduates of online doctoral programs are at risk for postdoctorate job discrimination because academic search committee members are inclined to believe that these programs do not provide their students with sufficient mentoring (Columbaro, 2009). Despite the serious nature of said claims and the plausible adverse ramifications of them, particularly concerning the potential negative effect they could have on postdoctorate employment opportunities, and thus, the student loan default rate among this population, the literature provided no data that refuted or substantiated these claims. Many researchers have focused on Black doctoral and graduate students attending TCUs.

I used a phenomenological design to explore the effectiveness of FPCUs' doctoral psychology programs in order to help academic employers, employers, policymakers, and FPCU administrators understand how Black FPCU doctorate recipients experience the transition to the role of the independent researcher, and what factors contribute to these students finishing their degrees at an FPCU. I designed the study to offer an in-depth

understanding of the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate in psychology at an FPCU. I employed a unique-criterion-purposive sample of seven Black, online doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees in various specialty areas at two FPCUs. Using an SDL theoretical lens and the concept of culture as a contextual lens, I specifically examined how study participants finished their degrees at their FPCUs and what factors contributed to their success.

The study's findings have implications for positive social change for administrators, legislators, researchers, practitioners, and interest groups seeking to improve online doctoral education, or seeking to influence financial aid policy. They provide stakeholders with a more in-depth understanding of how these students experience success in online doctoral psychology programs offered by FPCUs. They also help researchers separate variables that might assist them with improving models for FPCUs' online doctoral psychology programs, particularly for Black students.

Recommendations for practices are being made that, if implemented, (a) could enhance the meaningfulness Black online doctoral psychology students' experiences, (b) could save students time and money, and (c) could improve postdoctorate employment outcomes for Black students. The majority said that even though completing an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU was challenging, they have received "job promotions," "new jobs," or "pay increases since they have attained their doctorates." However, the study results revealed some insufficiencies in online doctoral psychology programs.

Some participants acknowledged that their FPCU's doctoral coursework phase requirements might have been more effective for preparing them for the dissertation experience had the FPCU curriculum been designed so that dissertation topic development would be introduced during this phase of their programs. The majority did not view their dissertation chair or committee member as a mentor based on their definition of what a mentor is and of what a mentor does. Many also said that they "wasted a lot of time and money trying to for their dissertation committees." Because of these findings, the following recommendations are being made:

1. I recommend that FPCUs redesign the curriculum for their doctoral psychology programs so that dissertation topic development is introduced during the doctoral coursework phase of their programs, particularly emphasizing the relevancy of the dissertation to students' transition to their new roles as independent researchers.
2. I recommend that FPCUs conduct periodic training with all doctoral faculty members, particularly emphasizing their roles, relative to preparing students for their new roles as independent researchers, and ensuring that they are encouraging students to link their coursework assignments to their dissertation topics.
3. I recommend that FPCUs move away from using "lists of available faculty" and develop more time efficient procedures for students to follow for forming their dissertation committees, and monitor these activities closely.

Conclusion

This study's results provide crucial information regarding the effectiveness of doctoral psychology programs offered by FPCUs. Overall, there is some consensus among the participants' stories that students who are more adept at taking control of the learning situation are more likely to be successful in completing these types of programs. Because all of the current study's participants overcame their challenges, it is obvious, according to previous research (e.g., Lee & Choi, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009), that their ability to conduct SDL had an influential role in their success.

Previous researchers found that a variety of factors and variables enhanced and impeded online students' persistence, which included individual characteristics, institutional factors, and external factors (e.g., Hachey et al., 2012; Hart, 2012; Ivankova & Stick, 2007). These were also noticeable in the experiences of the current study's participants. However, another factor that facilitated their success with directing self in, through, and to actualization was their cultural knowledge, which included their maintaining African Americans' cultural practices and cultural values. This knowledge also enhanced their ability to locate resources and their motivation to complete their programs.

The need for social change becomes apparent when the needs of societal members are no longer, or are not, being met because of breakdowns or particular practices in major societal systems. The findings of the current study reveal that cultural and procedural phenomena influenced Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees at the FPCUs. These phenomena particularly impacted their experiences

during the dissertation phase of their programs. Although this phenomenological study exemplifies the experiences of seven Black FPCU doctorate recipients who attained their degrees in psychology from an FPCU, the majority of their narratives uncovered some breaches in the FPCUs, represented in this study, procedural practices that are causing these students to waste time and student loan resources.

Love made a valid point when he said, "If a Black person decided to stop doing the program because of a life event, then I think it was an excuse that said, 'I can't afford it,' and so it comes back to the money." FPCUs have a responsibility to act in ways that are indicative of social accountability and responsibility. They have a duty to ensure that their practices align with good stewardship of student loan funds that U.S. officials are entrusting to them to provide doctoral students, needing these funds, with the knowledge and the skills necessary for their professional development. They also have an obligation to ensure that their procedures for preparing doctoral students to transition into their new roles are cost and time efficient.

The findings of this study can add to advancements in FPCU practices. They illuminate areas where Black social scientists, specializing in educational psychology and industrial and organizational psychology, have suggested are leading to students wasting student loan resources. These wasted funds could be the difference in whether the students have enough student loan funds to sustain them for the duration of their programs. In light of the results, examining the dissertation process at multiple FPCUs, using qualitative approaches, and using this sample as co-researchers, the research helps

stakeholders better understand how FPCUs can maximize the effectiveness of their programs.

Economists have projected that by Fall 2021, there will be an additional 3.5 million adults registered at FPCUs (Aud et al., 2013, pp. 64, 148), including Black adults. Sharing the most significant factors for why she would recommend attaining a doctorate from an online program, Kind said, "The fact that I finished; the fact that I could do it, single-parent, from a blue-collar family while working to make a living. I could do it. I did it." Because more Black adults are turning to FPCUs as an alternative to degree attainment (Hall, 2010), I purposely selected a unique-criterion-purposive sample of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPCU. I have made recommendations that could help to inform decisions regarding improvements in the U.S. doctoral education system, particularly concerning online doctoral psychology education offered by FPCUs.

Advancements in FPCU practices and reforms in student loan repayment policies could change the fate of current and prospective Black FPCU doctorate recipients. As Joy discussed what led her to her FPCU, Joy said, "I think online programs are going to be much more standard now . . . . Online learners are more disciplined and more focused," and she added, "We have to be very independent-type learners, so I think you get a person who is independent . . ., who thinks outside the box." However, the paucity of literature in the area of online doctoral education may be a reason why some FPCUs are not to taking full advantage of the possible progressive impact of their online doctoral

psychology programs. Joy concluded “I think going to an online university is a different way of thinking: a different way of learning, but it’s progressive. It’s cutting edge.”

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Appendix A: Study Recruitment Material

Study Distribution Flyer

HELP!

African American Graduates of Online Doctoral Programs

WHAT? A study seeking to understand the lived experiences of African American doctorate recipients who successfully completed online doctoral psychology programs at Title IV privately operated for-profit, online institutions that practice open admission (FPCUs).

Participation Criteria:

- Must be 25 years-old or older
- Must be African American/Black
- Must have attained a doctorate in psychology at a FPCU, within the past 5 years

TO WHAT EXTENT?

- One nonpaid 60- to 90-minute in-depth interview: via face-to-face, live chat, Skype, OR telephone and
- The time you spend reviewing, your interview summary.

How?

Contact Cathy Evans
at:
lhi help@netzero.com OR 972.803.0432

Study LISTSERV, Social Media, and Radio Announcement

Subject: Stories of African American Graduates of Online Doctoral Programs Needed!

African American doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate from online doctoral psychology programs at Title IV privately operated for-profit, online institutions that practice open admission (FPCUs), within the past 5 years , are needed to share their experiences and knowledge. Cathy Evans, a doctoral student at Walden University, is conducting a study. The study seeks to explore the academic achievement of African American students who completed online doctoral programs and attained a doctorate in psychology.

Invest a little time from your schedule by contributing your knowledge to an emerging body of knowledge.

To participate, you must be (a) African American and (b) must have attained a doctorate in psychology from an FPCU within the past 5 years. The time involved will consist of the following:

- One nonpaid 60- to 90-minute in-depth interview: face-to-face, live chat, Skype, **OR** telephone, and
- The time you spend reviewing, your interview summary.

For more information, please contact Cathy Evans at lhi_help@netzero.com.

Respondent Screening Tool

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. However, I have to ensure that you are appropriate for the study. Please provide me with the following information. When you have filled in the information, please e-mail the form as soon as possible, to lhi_help@netzero.com.

Today's date: _____ Your e-mail address/phone number _____

What is your preferred ethnic or racial category? _____

Was your program fully online? In other words, was at least 80% of your program coursework, delivered online? □ No □ Yes

Did you complete an independent research study/dissertation? □ No □ Yes

In which field, did you attain your doctorate (e.g., business, education, engineering, mathematics, psychology, science, technology, psychology)? _____

When was your doctorate conferred? Month _____ Year _____

Preferred Contact Method: □ E-mail □ Phone □ Other _____ Time Zone: _____

Preferred Interview Method: □ Face-to-Face □ Phone □ Live Chat □ Skype □ Other

Preferred Interview Day:

□ Monday □ Tuesday □ Wednesday □ Thursday □ Friday □ Saturday

Preferred Interview Time:

□ 9-10:30am CST □ 11am-12:30pm CST □ 1-2:30pm CST □ 4:30-6pm □ 6:30-8pm CST

Thank you for providing me with this information. I will send you notification, via e-mail , within 24 hours if you meet the study's criteria. The e-mail will provide additional information, regarding the study.

To be completed by researcher.

Is this respondent appropriate for the study? □ No □ Yes

Appendix B: Letter of Introduction, Informed Consent Form, and Demographic Sheet

Letter of Introduction

Today's Date:

Dear Respondent:

I am writing this letter to follow up on your response to the announcement about the "Black online, doctoral psychology graduates' Academic Achievement: A Phenomenological Epistemological Self-Directed Learning Perspective" research study. My name is Cathy Evans. I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. If you need to contact me, my e-mail address is lhi_help@netzero.com, and my telephone number is 972-803-0432.

Many for-profit private, online institutions (FPCUs) have been successful with capturing the ethnic minority adult market. In fact, the data indicate that the number of ethnic minority adults attaining doctorates has increased. As you know, the final step to attaining a doctorate is the successful completion of the dissertation, which consists of conducting an independent research study. However, the literature indicates 60% of Black graduate students in doctoral programs fail to persist through the dissertation phase. What is unknown is what contributes to Black psychology students finishing their degrees at FPCUs.

My dissertation research focuses on the academic achievement of Black doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate in psychology at FPCUs. This research will provide some insight into what Black doctorate recipients experience in successfully completing online doctoral psychology programs and the factors that contribute to their finishing their degrees s. I understand that your time is important to you. However if you are selected to participate, we will need to meet on one occasion for an in-depth interview.

For your convenience, I will provide you the option of a face-to-face, live chat, Skype, **OR** telephone interview, which I will conduct on the day and at the time you select unless someone else has selected that particular day and time. The interview will follow a semi-structured format to help me get to know you and to learn about your experience of the dissertation process in your program at the FPCU. I will e-mail a summary of the interview so you can ensure that her summary resonates with your experiences and the meanings you ascribed to them, within 7 to 10 days.

I will keep your information confidential and private. I will destroy all data 5 years after the conclusion of the study. Enclosed is a copy of the consent form that provides explicit details about the study. Please read the form carefully.

Sincerely,

Cathy Evans, Doctoral Candidate
Walden University

Enclosure

Informed Consent Form

Cathy Evans, a doctoral student at Walden University, is conducting a study of the academic achievement of Black doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate in psychology at Title IV privately operated for-profit, online institutions that practice open admission (FPCUs), and is inviting you to participate. I am asking you to participate because you indicated that you completed an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU, within the past 5 years. However, it is important to ensure that you are completely informed and fully understand the explicit details of the study prior to deciding whether you want to participate. This consent form details some background information, study procedures, and the voluntary nature of the study. It also covers benefits and risks that may be associated with participating in the study, and discusses compensation, confidentiality, and privacy as well as provides contact information for research-related questions. The form ends with a statement of consent. The next section provides some background information.

Background Information

There is a need to know more about successful students' experiences in online doctoral psychology programs at FPCUs. I may select you as a possible participant because you indicated that you have experienced the phenomenon under investigation. The intention of the current study will be to describe the meaning of academic achievement for Black doctorate recipients who attained a doctorate in psychology at FPCUs. Therefore, I assume that you can offer first-hand information about the experiences of Black online, doctoral psychology students who finished their degrees at an FPUC and the factors that contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees s.

I may ask you to provide a little background information about your former doctoral psychology program and university. I may ask you to walk me through your journey from the time you began the dissertation phase to the time you attained your doctorate. In addition, I may ask you to tell me about the most critical aspects of the experience (e.g., what and when). The next section outlines the study's procedures.

Study Procedures

The following procedures will govern your participation in the study if you consent to participate:

The following procedures will govern your participation in the study if you consent to participate:

1. It is my request that you complete and e-mail the demographic sheet back to me. I will then review the information.
2. I also will ask some participants to be interviewed based on their area of concentration, their doctorate conferment date, and their FPCU. Based on the information contained in the demographic sheet, I will purposefully select a

sample of 10-12 individuals to participate in the study; I will contact you via e-mail or telephone to request your participation, and I will e-mail those who I did not select for the interview to inform them that I did not select them.
3. At this time, we will schedule your interview; you will have the option of a face-to-face, live chat, Skype, **OR** telephone interview.
4. I will e-mail a summary of the interview, within 7 to 10 days, so you can ensure that my summary resonates with your experiences and the meanings you ascribed to them.

The Voluntary Nature of the Study
If you participate, your participation will be voluntary. This means that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Although you will have provided informed consent, you will still have the option to stop your participation at any time. No one will treat you differently.

Potential Benefits and Risks
There are a few potential benefits for participating in this study. Based on my review of the current literature, there are several gaps in the knowledge on this topic. The information that you provide regarding your experience and knowledge of the phenomenon could help fill some of these gaps. In addition, because the primary objective of graduate programs is to grant students the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in their field, your knowledge could help FPCUs pinpoint system insufficiencies and help to develop strategies that enhance online doctoral psychology programs, which could improve outcomes for FPCU doctorate recipients.

The estimated likelihood and magnitude of risks for participating in this type of study are minimal. Participating in the study should not pose any threats to your safety or wellbeing although you may encounter some minor discomforts, such as those encountered in daily life. Researchers have suggested that the dissertation process is the most strenuous endeavors a doctoral student will experience; therefore, you may experience some fatigue, negative emotions, and or psychological stress as you relive the experience. In addition, depending on the interview method that you select, there is a potential risk of someone overhearing the conversation; you may disclose irrelevant information, during the interviews, or you may find the interview questions intrusive.

Compensation
I appreciate your participation in the study. However, there is no payment for participation.

Confidentiality and Privacy
Protecting confidential data is an important aspect of research. Confidential data that the research collects from you, during any aspect of the study, will be stored in file folders in several formats: electronic audio or electronic media (depending on your chosen interview mode) as well as paper formats. I will label these data with pseudonyms to

conceal your identity. The digital recorder and paper files will be stored inside a locked file cabinet while electronic media and audio-recorded data will be stored on an external hard drive and password-protected computer in I's secured home-office.

Although I am the only person having access to the computer, digital recorder, and password, it is possible that people in the immediate area where you are completing the interview could overhear your responses. However, I will keep the information you provide confidential. This means that I will use your information only for study-related purposes. These data will be stored for 5 years, following the completion of the study as required by the university. Then, I will delete, shred, and burn them.

Contacts and Questions

If you have any questions, now or later, please ask them. You can contact me, Cathy Evans, by e-mail at lhi_help@netzero.com, or by telephone at 972-803-0432. If you need to talk about your rights as a participant, you can call 612-312-1210 to speak with Dr. Leilani Endicott, the Walden University representative who handles these types of issues. The Walden University Institutional Review Board's approval number for this study is 11-12-14-0147183; it expires November 11, 2015.

Statement of Consent

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all necessary questions and have received adequate answers. I believe that I understand the study adequately enough to make an informed decision about my participation. In replying to this e-mail with the words, "I consent," I am indicating that I am agreeing to the study's terms. Please print and or save a copy of this consent form for your records.

Researcher's Participant Demographic Sheet

Thank you for consenting to participate in this study. However, I need additional information to assist with determining whom I will ultimately interview. This information will help me maximize credibility and transferability for the study. When you have filled in the information, please e-mail the form as soon as possible, to lhi_help@netzero.com.

In what state do you live? _____ What is your gender? _____

What is your age? _____ Which online institution did you attend? _____

Would you recommend this institution to a co-worker, family member, or friend?
□ No □ Yes

Would you recommend online learning to a co-worker, family member, or friend?
□ No □ Yes

What is the institution's mantra or philosophy? _____

What is your area of expertise (e.g., clinical psychology, counseling psychology forensic psychology, or organizational psychology)? _____

When did you attain your Bachelor's degree? _____What was your major? _____

When did you attain your Master's degree? _____

What was your area of concentration? _____

Considering what you expected when you entered the doctoral psychology program at the institution and what you experienced, how satisfied with the outcome are you?

□ extremely dissatisfied □ extremely satisfied □ dissatisfied □ satisfied □ indifferent

Thank you for providing me with this information. The researcher will call and e-mail you within the next 24 hours to schedule your interview if she selects you to participate in the study.

To be completed by researcher.

Will this individual be included in the study? □ No □ Yes Pseudonym: _____
Interview Date: _____
Interview Method: □ E-mail □ Phone □ Live Chat □ Skype □ Other
Interview Day: □ Monday □ Tuesday □ Wednesday □ Thursday □ Friday □ Saturday
Interview Time: □ 9-10:30am □ 11am-12:30pm □ 1-2:30pm □ 4:30-6pm □ 6:30-8:00pm

Appendix C: Researcher's Developed Instruments

Researcher's Interview Protocol

What is the lived experience of Black students who completed an online doctoral psychology program at an FPCU?

1. Tell me a little about yourself.

Probes:
1a. On the demographic sheet, you noted that you attained your bachelor's degree in ____ and that your major was _____. You also noted that you attained your master's degree in ____ and that your concentration was _____. How did you decide to attain your doctorate in _____, and at _____?
1b. What was it about that particular area of psychology that piqued your interest?
1c. Tell me how, if at all, did your career plans relate to earning your doctorate in this area of psychology.
1d. On the demographic sheet, you noted that you would or would not recommend this institution to a co-worker, family member, or friend. The data indicate that there are four FPCUs offering online doctoral psychology programs (NSF, 2012), what led you to enroll at _____?

2. Tell me about your school's requirements for enrolling in the _____ doctoral program.

3. On the respondent's screening tool, you noted that your preferred ethnic or racial category was _____, while other respondents noted that their preferred ethnic or racial category was _____. Help me to understand why you preferred _____ rather than _____.

4. How has life been different for you, an African American/Black psychologist, since you finished the _____ psychology program and attained your degree from _____?

Probe:
4a. On the demographic sheet, you noted that the institution's philosophy was _____. As an African American/Black student pursuing a doctorate in psychology, how, if at all, did this saying resonate with your experience?

5. On the demographic sheet, you noted that you were ____ with the outcome, when considering what you expected when you entered the _____ psychology program at _____ and what you experienced. Tell me more about this.

Probes:
5a. What were the requirements for completing the program (e.g., number of courses, electives, residencies, dissertation)?

5b. What was your conception of the dissertation/independent research project?
5c. In your opinion, how well do you think that the program requirements prepared you for your dissertation/independent research experience, and how so?

6. On the demographic sheet, you noted that the topic of your dissertation was _____. How did you arrive at this topic?

Probes:
6a. When did you begin to develop topic of your dissertation?
6b. What was it about this particular topic that piqued your interest?
6c. How did you perceive the reception of your topic?

7. Tell me about your experience during the dissertation/independent research phase from the time you reached all but dissertation (ABD) status to obtaining final approval of your final study (e.g., forming your committee, completing your premise or prospectus, completing your proposal, obtaining IRB approval, conducting your study, etc.).

Probes:
7a. Who were the key people involved in your dissertation/independent research project experience?
7b. What was your understanding of what these individuals' duties or obligations relative to your dissertation/independent research project experience?
7c. Tell me about your mentors and your support system as you progressed towards completing your dissertation/independent research project and obtaining the final approval.

8. Research has shown that Black students experience phenomena that White students do not experience, such as a fear of fulfilling stereotypes associated with being Black and feeling unsure about whether they belong in a given learning situation (Cokley, 2002; Gasman, Hirschfeld, & Vultaggio, 2008; Mallett et al., 2011). As a Black student who was pursuing a field that White individuals have historically dominated, how do these phenomena resonate with your experience?

Probe:
8a. If you experienced any instances of stereotyping, how did you reconcile the fear of fulfilling stereotypes or any feeling of uncertainty about whether you belonged in a doctoral psychology program?

9. Walk me through what you did in order to complete your dissertation/independent research project, including what you did in order to have it approved (e.g., identifying the research problem, conducting the literature review, using an editor, moving through the school's process for submitting your work, etc.).

RQ2. What are the factors that contribute to Black online, doctoral psychology students finishing their degrees at an FPCU?

10. The data indicate that 60% of Black doctoral students fail during the dissertation phase and that 50% of online students, in general, fail to complete their programs (Di Pierro, 2012; Hall, 2010; Lynch, Engle, & Cruz, 2010). In your opinion, what were the most significant factors that contributed to your success at _____?

Probes:
10a. Based on this explanation, what were some specific culturally specific, personal factors that contributed to you to finishing your degree?
10b. What, in your opinion, were some specific university-related factors that contributed you to your success at _____, based on this explanation?

11. On the demographic sheet, you noted that you would or would not recommend attaining a doctorate from an online program to a co-worker, family member, or friend. Which factors were the most significant in you reaching this conclusion?

Appendix D: Agreements and Institutional Permissions

Dear Ms. Evans,

This e-mail is to notify you that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved your application for the study entitled, "Black online, doctoral psychology graduates' Academic Achievement: A Phenomenological Epistemological Self-Directed Learning Perspective."

Your approval # is 11-12-14-0147183. You will need to reference this number in your dissertation and in any future funding or publication submissions. Also attached to this e-mail is the IRB approved consent form. Please note if this is already in an on-line format, you will need to update that consent document to include the IRB approval number and expiration date.

Your IRB approval expires on November 11, 2015. One month before this expiration date, you will be sent a Continuing Review Form, which must be submitted if you wish to collect data beyond the approval expiration date.

Your IRB approval is contingent upon your adherence to the exact procedures described in the final version of the IRB application document that has been submitted as of this date. This includes maintaining your current status with the university. Your IRB approval is only valid while you are an actively enrolled student at Walden University. If you need to take a leave of absence or are otherwise unable to remain actively enrolled, your IRB approval is suspended. Absolutely NO participant recruitment or data collection may occur while a student is not actively enrolled.

If you need to make any changes to your research staff or procedures, you must obtain IRB approval by submitting the IRB Request for Change in Procedures Form. You will receive confirmation with a status update of the request within 1 week of submitting the change request form and are not permitted to implement changes prior to receiving approval. Please note that Walden University does not accept responsibility or liability for research activities conducted without the IRB's approval, and the University will not accept or grant credit for student work that fails to comply with the policies and procedures related to ethical standards in research.

When you submitted your IRB application, you made a commitment to communicate both discrete adverse events and general problems to the IRB within 1 week of their occurrence/realization. Failure to do so may result in invalidation of data, loss of academic credit, and/or loss of legal protections otherwise available to the researcher.

Both the Adverse Event Reporting form and Request for Change in Procedures form can be obtained at the IRB section of the Walden website:
http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/researchcenter/orec

Researchers are expected to keep detailed records of their research activities (i.e., participant log sheets, completed consent forms, etc.) for the same period of time they retain the original data. If, in the future, you require copies of the originally submitted IRB materials, you may request them from Institutional Review Board.

Both students and faculty are invited to provide feedback on this IRB experience at the link below:
http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=qHBJzkJMUx43pZegKlmdiQ_3d_3d

Sincerely,
Libby Munson
Research Ethics Support Specialist
Office of Research Ethics and Compliance
E-mail : irb@waldenu.edu
Fax: 626-605-0472
Phone: 612-312-1283

Office address for Walden University:
100 Washington Avenue South, Suite 900
Minneapolis, MN 55401
Information about the Walden University Institutional Review Board, including instructions for application, may be found at this link:
http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/researchcenter/orec

Notification of Participant Pool Approval

Hi Cathy,

Your study has been approved and is now visible to participants. Please note, if you make any changes to your study at this point, it will automatically hide the study from participants. Thus, you will need to send an e-mail to participantpool@waldenu.edu to request that the study be re-approved, and thus be made available to participants again.

When your data collection is complete, you will need to deactivate your study (by clicking on "no" in the Active Study field on the Change Study Information page). This will hide the study from the participants' view, but you as the researcher will still have access to it until your IRB approval expires.

Sincerely,
Libby Munson
Research Ethics Support Specialist
Office of Research Ethics and Compliance
Walden University
100 Washington Avenue South, Suite 900
Minneapolis, MN 55401
(612) 312-1283