Oral narrative and analysis of one African American female's struggle for success in higher education

Kathleen Marie Clauson
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Oral narrative and analysis of one African American female's struggle for success in higher education

by

Kathleen Marie Clauson

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Higher Education)
Major Professor: Daniel C. Robinson

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2000

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This is to certify that the Doctoral dissertation of
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For the Major Program
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For the Graduate College
DEDICATION

The completion of any graduate program, especially for a non-traditional student with professional and family responsibilities, means that many people share the workloads.

I am grateful to my advisor, Dr. Dan Robinson, for his help and guidance throughout my graduate studies at Iowa State. I am also indebted to the members of my committee, Dr. Nancy Evans, Dr. Larry Ebbers, Dr. Martin Miller, and Dr. Eric Hoiberg.

I wish to thank the participant-narrator for her time, candor, and lessons, as well as her huge extended family for opening up to me.

I wish to thank my children, Jordan and Tabitha Jensen, for their emotional and computer support.

Finally, I need to thank my mom, Valborg Beata Peterson Clauson, for everything.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This research study utilized the qualitative method of narrative inquiry to create and analyze the oral narrative of one African American female's struggle for success in higher education. This method allowed investigation of life experiences meaningful to the participant-narrator’s success in higher education to be accomplished in collaboration with the participant-narrator: a student voice was heard and preserved. The oral narrative was then analyzed by the researcher in order to identify and examine elements (family and individual characteristics, life events, interactions, personal meanings) relevant to factors that have been identified by existing research findings as related to student development, especially African-American persistence in higher education.

Traditional research in higher education is highly quantitative and Eurocentric. The contribution of this extremely focused research is found in an analysis of the personal insights and meanings that will assist practitioners and researchers whose counseling styles, teaching methods, policies, practices and theories are designed to deal with large, diverse groups, but which dramatically affect individual lives.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Every year American higher education touches millions of students: each of those students feels that touch differently. Since the American Council on Education (ACE) recognized individual differences in 1949 by publishing a specific Personnel Point of View, practitioners have advocated the principles that each student is unique, that each student has worth and dignity, and that bigotry cannot be tolerated. These principles are especially pertinent to today's diverse student population. The Student Personnel Point of View (ACE, 1949) also declared that feelings, student involvement, personal circumstances, out-of-class environments, and supportive community life affect thinking and learning. These variables are complex and difficult to assess.

Statement of the Problem

In order to evaluate our work by the standards we have set for ourselves, and to continue to attract, retain, and graduate college students, an understanding of the impact of many personal, complex variables on huge numbers of unique individuals is needed. Traditionally, quantitative methods that take brief glimpses at students through surveys and analyses of numbers drawn from student records have been used to study as many students as possible. Time-consuming qualitative methods allow researchers to pay more attention to each individual but cannot cover as much of the student population, and qualitative generalizations are weakened by the complexity of the variables they attempt to explore; thus they have been viewed as less valid. Yet every student is unique.

"Today's undergraduates are living in a world in which differences are multiplying and change is the norm" (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 159). In such diverse environments, quantitative generalizations are also complicated by the fact that subpopulations of students differ in essential qualities that are invisible to the numbers-cruncher. Even careful sampling may be confounded when a population is inequitably
represented. The African American college student population is an example of an underrepresented population. The proportion of African Americans over age 25 who completed four or more years of college in 1996 was 13.6% compared to 24.3% for whites over age 25 (ACE, 1998).

An awareness of such statistics can enable careful researchers to choose representative samples, but there are too many unevenly distributed, potentially confounding, unpredictable characteristics (races, ages, social classes, family compositions, sexual orientations) to control for in any single sample. Any one or more of these characteristics may be important enough to a given student to be self-defining. The student population is diversifying so rapidly that students who have previously been overlooked on the basis of these characteristics will soon comprise the majority of college students (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993; Rendon & Hope, 1996a). Identification of a group norm without consideration of certain individual differences creates a singular reality that overlooks integral characteristics of subsample members, characteristics that are important enough to be self-defining.

A review of student development literature indicates that African American students have only received attention since Fleming’s (1984) landmark study. “But minority students do not learn in the same way that whites learn; they do not find the predominantly Eurocentric curriculum reflective of their realities” (Rendon & Hope, 1996b, p. 467). Traditional research in higher education has been based on the values, philosophical assumptions, and experiences of European-Americans, thus, when these theories are used in working with black students, conclusions are often reached that are not accurate” (McEwen, Roper, Bryant, & Langa, 1990).

African-American women have been overlooked on two characteristics, race and gender. The void in theoretical frameworks for studying women of color, black women in particular, continues (Hambrick, 1997), as if African American women are an invisible
group on the sidelines that easily can be combined with other groups (Etter-Lewis, 1993). Too little research has focused on developmental processes for students of color: older students; students from different cultural backgrounds; students with disabilities; gay, lesbian, and bisexual students; and students from various religious traditions and socioeconomic classes (Evans, Forney, & DiBrito, 1998).

Evans et al.'s include non-traditional age students in their presentation of unique but relevant student characteristics. The student population is aging (Rendon & Hope, 1996a) and research involving only 18 to 22 year-olds overlooks these older students. Adults who return to school at an older age are inevitably experiencing a transition and in need of special types of support (Schlossberg, 1984).

Indeed, valuable quantitative studies of huge student samples have been conducted recently (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Levine & Cureton, 1998). Qualitative research which focuses on in-depth, long-term interaction with relevant people is beginning to flourish in education (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) as well. One qualitative approach, interpretive interactionism, focuses on the experiences of individuals and is intended to provide direction for policy-makers and program-developers. "Its emphasis on the uniqueness of each life holds up the individual case as the measure of effectiveness of all applied programs" (Denzin, 1989, p. 11). By capturing the voices, emotions and actions of those studied, it endeavors to make the world of lived experience directly accessible to the reader.

The focus of interpretive research is on those life experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and to their experiences (Denzin, 1989) because, to the interpretist, any instance of problematic social interaction represents a slice of experience that is proper subject matter for interpretive inquiry. Recommended interpretive methods include open-ended, creative interviewing; document analysis; life-story; life history; personal experience and self-story
construction; participant-observation, and thick description. Narrative inquiry is an interpretive form of open-ended, creative interviewing that assumes people’s realities are constructed through the act of narrating their stories and that results in a written life history (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Oral narrative is especially applicable to the African American female population because the oral tradition is important in African-American culture (Awkward, 1990; Collins, 1990; Hall & Freedle, 1975; hooks, 1989; Scott, 1991; White, 1997; Vaz, 1997). Important to the purpose of this study, self-reported life-histories directly challenge inaccurate stereotypes (Scott, 1991). Although this method may not confirm or conclusively explain the existence of social phenomena, by encouraging individuals to represent their own life experience, it can certainly shed light on how and why the social world affects their lives (White, 1996).

Interpretive methods inherently respect subjects by allowing them to speak for themselves. They are interactional, they aid the subject by facilitating a search for personal meaning, and they are based on sophisticated rigor (Denzin, 1989). It seems fair, then, to supplement the existing body of student development literature with an in-depth method that gives respect and voice to a member of three currently underrepresented populations: non-traditional students, African Americans, and women.

In light of the lack of research on students with these important characteristics, this study intentionally focused on one articulate individual who was a successful student in spite of being a female, minority group member. Understanding this student’s success will provide insights, previously hidden from quantitative surface scans, that will provide direction for future researchers and professionals whose counseling styles, teaching methods, policies and practices must be designed to deal with large, diverse groups but which dramatically affect individual lives.
Purpose of the Study

Denzin (1989) stated, “Life experiences give greater substance and depth to the problem the researcher wishes to study” (p. 49). The specific purpose of the proposed qualitative study was to present, interpret, and analyze the life experiences of a professional, African American woman who successfully completed a rigorous, three-year, post-secondary diploma program, maintains a professional career and an active alumni status, and manages a family and life-threatening illness. This 37-year old woman, with a composite ACT score of 18, might have been classified by quantitative researchers as barely average, yet she is exceptional. Because she is a representative of three populations (African American females, non-traditional students) that have been previously underrepresented in research, details of her experience may shed light on existing student development concepts.

Raised in a small, inner-city, Chicago apartment with seven siblings by an illiterate father and a working mother, the participant-narrator graduated eighth in a high school class of 178 with a cumulative grade point average of 3.25. She completed four semesters at an Illinois university. When her parents informed her they could no longer afford the cost of college, she joined the army for the sole purpose of obtaining college funds through the Montgomery Bill. Ten years later she successfully completed a three-year nursing program at a small, predominantly white institution in Iowa as a non-traditional student, wife, and mother of two sons. Her secondary and post-secondary grades and test scores indicate she was an academically average student. Six years after graduation, she maintains a successful professional career, active alumni status, operates weekly free clinics on a volunteer basis, manages a family of four, and is recovering from a kidney transplant. In fall 2000, she plans to return to college part-time to complete a Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree. In spite of considerable stressors and struggles.
her outlook on life is irrepressibly positive; she considers her career and professional lifestyle as gifts and attributes those gifts to her education, the greatest gift of all.

The detailed exploration of this unique individual's experience was intended to uncover elements of family and individual characteristics, life events, interactions, and personal meanings, that are invisible in traditional, quantitative research and not immediately apparent in initial qualitative interviews. By utilizing interpretive methods, this exploration respected the participant's ability to collaborate, to speak for herself, to tell all the necessary pieces of her story, to analyze her own experiences, and to review and help refine the analyses of the researcher.

**Research Questions**

As a result of the researcher's ten years of professional student affairs experience, a comprehensive review of the literature, and the qualitative research process, three questions were identified as the focus of exploration for this research study.

1. What is the life story of an academically average but persistent, motivated, African American female who was raised in an urban, low-income neighborhood, graduated from a predominantly white institution of higher education in Iowa, maintains an active career and community service commitment, and manages a family and life-threatening illness?

2. How do elements (family and individual characteristics, life events, interactions, personal meanings) of this life story relate to factors that have been identified by existing research findings as related to student development, especially African American persistence in higher education?

3. What can be learned from this woman's story that can guide future research and practice in student affairs?
Significance of the Study

"I do argue on behalf of an approach that keeps humans always present."
(Wolcott, 1995, p. 15) This study began with the proposition that detailed.
 qualitative investigations of individual student life experiences are needed to
 assist student affairs professionals, faculty and college administrators in
evaluating and creating humanistic policies and programs that will best serve the
needs of students previously underrepresented in research. There are millions of
African-American women involved as students in higher education today, yet a
review of the literature, conducted through the Educational Resources
Information Center (ERIC), WorldCat, and Dissertation Abstracts International,
indicated that no theoretical frameworks have been developed for African
American female college students. The significance of this study is in providing
rich data, unavailable through traditional research methodology, about this large
but previously overlooked group, African American women.

Three assumptions of interpretive interactionism, iterated by Denzin
(1989), support the significance of this extremely focused, qualitative research
study. First, in the world of human experience, there is only interpretation.
Second, it is a worthy goal to attempt to make these interpretations available to
others because they will facilitate the understandings which underlie policies and
programs. Third, all interpretations are unfinished and inconclusive and readers
must contribute their own insights. This respect for the experiences and personal
interpretations of the subjects, practitioners, researchers, and readers provides a
unique opportunity for exploring complex variables that are hidden by
quantitative methods.

Just as oral narrative research challenges the researcher and participant-narrator to
extend the boundary of the self, it challenges academia to do the same (Vaz, 1997). I
believe this study will contribute valuable, detailed, descriptive information to the higher education literature for contemplation and analysis by current and future practitioners and scholars. I further believe that those professionals who accept the challenge of this thoughtful, in-depth approach and who take the time to ponder the details and nuances of a life story will gain a greater awareness of students as unique individuals. In turn, they will be able to further refine practice and contribute new ideas and concepts to expand the research base.

**Summary**

In the course of American higher education, there have been millions of students, each with unique experiences, and a qualitative study cannot be made of every one. Yet students are individuals, and in a time when the American college student profile is increasingly diverse and rapidly changing, the need to consider and preserve individual experiences is great.

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) caution a researcher to ask. “What is it that I can find out that cannot be revealed using other materials or even doing a different type of study altogether?” Qualitative, interactionist, interpretive methods differ from traditional quantitative methods by focusing on the experiences of ordinary, struggling individuals (Denzin, 1989). Unlike traditional methods, interpretive methods respect each unique case as a potential measure of program effectiveness that is sufficient to provide direction for policy-makers and program-developers (Denzin, 1989). Thus, the interpretive, interdisciplinary method of narrative analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) was selected to allow an individual, African American woman to speak for herself, to relate all of the experiences she deemed to be relevant to her success in higher education, and thus to make meaning of her own life. Use of this method also enabled the capture and preservation of her unique story for in-depth contemplation by future practitioners and researchers.
Organization of the Study

This qualitative study was designed to document and provide interpretive analysis of the personal experiences of one African-American, female student's persistence and of how her experience relates to the existing body of student development literature, as well as to suggest directions for future research and practice. To guide the gathering of data and analysis, the study is organized into five chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the subject and scope of the study, including a statement of the problem, purpose, research questions, and significance. The remaining four chapters describe the development of the study and its findings in more detail.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of student development literature to acquaint the reader with existing research findings that may be related to the personal development and academic persistence of African American, female, post-secondary students.

Chapter 3 describes the evolution and implementation of the qualitative research methodology employed in the study. Specifically, Chapter 3 addresses the initial identification of the research study and objectives, research participant selection, data collection and methods of data analysis as well as the means for reporting the data. A qualitative research approach provided the opportunity to develop the study in a manner that allowed the researcher to analyze relevant issues as they emerged throughout the research process.

Chapter 4 introduces the collaborators, the researcher and the participant-narrator, and presents the oral narrative and an analysis of the data that were gathered in the creation of the narrative.

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the research findings and includes a discussion of the significance, possible meaning, and implications of the overall study. From the findings associated with this study, recommendations are made for further research. Limitations of the study are discussed and conclusions are identified.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

The qualitative methodology relies on an inductive approach in which theory emerges throughout the process (Brown, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Thus, some qualitative researchers argue against reviewing the literature until after data collection has begun, for fear that the researcher will be unduly influenced by concepts and techniques of others (Glesne, 1999). However, Denzin (1989) admitted that value-free interpretive research is impossible and simply cautioned researchers to initially identify prior interpretations of the phenomena being investigated. Thus, Glesne’s solution was appropriate for this study:

Knowledge of the literature will help you to judge whether your research plans go beyond existing findings and may thereby contribute to your field of study...I think that literature should be read throughout the research process including a thorough search before data collection begins. (1999, p.20)

A study such as this is best conducted by a researcher who has a basic understanding of factors, drawn from research literature, that may become relevant during the inductive process of narrative inquiry. To ground analysis in a strong base of relevant theme topics, a thorough search of educational literatures was conducted before data collection began. As recurring themes emerged, the literature base was reconsulted.

Initial literature searches, initiated through the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), WorldCat, and Dissertation Abstracts International, yielded no theoretical frameworks specific to African American female students, yet identified over 10,000 articles, books, and papers that presented an overwhelming number of theories and concepts that involved student development and African Americans. Key words related to college persistence, ethnicity, and gender focused the search on studies...
involving successful African American female college students. When motivation or attrition was used as a key word, abstracts tended to define participants as “at-risk” or “disadvantaged”. Believing that “black student development must not be viewed as deficit development” (McEwen, Roper, Bryant, & Langa. 1990, p. 434), studies defining African American students in this negative manner were not consulted.

A theme that emerged early and remained strong throughout the research process involved the strong relationship ties of the participant. Examples of strong, supportive, and/or influential parent, family, and community interactions before and during college were ever-present. Her storytelling speech was permeated with mini-dialogues, as if responses were dependent upon a connection she had made with someone in an earlier conversation. Corroborating interviews with former faculty members indicated that the narrator, indeed, had left enduring pieces of herself with them. I labeled this theme connectedness and, because it interacted with all other variables, used it to focus the literature search and data analysis.

**Literature Review**

*A Guiding Theory*

“Undoubtedly, the most influential [early] psychologist on student affairs was Carl Rogers. For many student affairs professionals trained in the fifties and sixties, before the emergence of what we now call student development theory. Rogers (1961) provided a very powerful theoretical basis for our work” (Upcraft & Moore. 1990). Rogers’ belief in person-centered counseling and his constructs of self-actualization and unconditional positive regard were adopted by many student affairs practitioners in the fifties and sixties (Upcraft & Moore. 1990). Rogers instructed counselors to center interventions around the person of concern with the intent of apprehending the person’s internal frame of reference. This phenomenological approach to practice is consistent with the phenomenological research approach that has been adopted for this study.
Student Development Theory

The seeds for current student development theory were planted in the 1960's by Sanford (1962), Erikson (1968), Perry (1968), and Kohlberg (1969). The theories of these male researchers were formed from studies that involved only white male participants. Although the focus of my study is a woman of color, these seminal concepts must be presented as the foundation of this literature review.

In one of the earliest studies related to psychosocial student development, Sanford (1962) explored the relationship between college environments and adolescent development. He identified two cycles, differentiation and integration, that lead young adults toward understanding their identities. His work promoted the concept of optimal dissonance and encouraged educators and institutions to provide students with a careful balance of challenge and support. Erikson (1968) developed the first stage theory of psychosocial development. Each stage involved an identity crisis and his concept of the identity-defining impact of crises and commitments provided scaffolding for later theories of psychosocial development.

Perry's (1968) theory of intellectual development traced a progression through a series of epistemological perspectives that students use to give meaning to their educational experience. According to Perry, a student begins in a stage called dualism, where the student views the world as right or wrong, and moves to multiplicity as the student begins to understand that authorities may not have the right answers. Students mature in a stage called relativism when they develop the understanding that knowledge is not simply provided by an authority figure but is contextual and constructed.

Kohlberg's (1969) moral development theory identified six sequential stages that comprise three levels of moral judgement. The highest and most complex stage involves a universal-ethical-principal orientation, or an ability to anchor judgements in objective principles of justice. In a later essay, Kohlberg applied his theory to the practice of
teaching with the basic premise that “the aim of education ought to be the personal development of students toward more complex ways of reasoning” (1977, p. 55).

These foundational studies, typical of their time, were by white males and of white males. Minimal research studies and no theoretical frameworks specific to African American female college students are available. Because most of the work that extends student development theory to diverse populations has focused on psychosocial development (Evans, Forney, & DiBrito, 1998), the next section outlines the progression and eventual diversity of psychosocial theory. Since identity in its most comprehensive sense encompasses not only the traditional notions of identity but also identity dimensions viewed through important social constructions such as race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, ability, and disability (McEwen, 1996), a wide variety of theories related to psychosocial and identity development were explored.

The section that follows identifies the more recent and inclusive offspring of intellectual and moral development theories and the final section focuses on the work of black women intellectuals. Throughout the processes of data collection and analysis the research described in this literature review was considered for relevance to African American, female, college student development.

Theories of Psychosocial Development

Chickering (1969) expanded Sanford’s concept of integration and differentiation to develop a paradigm consisting of seven vectors of development and, in 1993, collaborated with Reisser to refine one of the most frequently cited theories in student development. The seven interactive vectors address developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. Although Chickering’s original work, like that of Sanford, Erikson, Perry, and Kohlberg, focused on development as an autonomous, rational process, the revision
includes relational (or connected) dimensions (Baxter-Magolda, 1995).

Only a few researchers have applied Chickering's theory solely to women (Straub & Rodgers, 1986) or African-American students (Branch Simpson, 1984). However, the vectors are, at the very least, descriptions of human characteristics that will facilitate the evaluation of any student's needs.

Like Chickering's theory, most psychosocial theories are rooted in Erikson's (1968) theory of ego identity formation which assumes that development centers around a series of identity crises. Building on Erikson's work, Marcia (1980) identified four distinct ego identity statuses related to crises and commitment. A person in a status of diffusion feels no sense of commitment to a particular set of values. In foreclosure, family values are accepted without question so there is no values-related crisis. A person at moratorium status is experiencing much conflict and crisis and no commitment. Once a person reaches a status of achieved identity, crises have been resolved and a comfortable, personal commitment has been made.

Although Marcia originally studied only men, Josselson (1987) applied these statuses to the study of women and concluded that those who reach an achieved state (who become an identity achiever in Josselson's terms) are able to balance the primary need for relationships with the need to assert the self. Phinney's (1990) work with minority adolescents resulted in an ethnic identity model with three stages that parallel Marcia's statuses, diffusion/foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. According to Phinney, socially, these statuses affect four possible coping outcomes: alienation/marginalization, assimilation, withdrawal, and integration/biculturalism.

Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1989) developed a minority identity development model that describes a developmental process as five stages that oppressed people may experience as they struggle to understand themselves in terms of their own minority culture and the oppressive relationship between the two cultures. Each stage is defined
according to attitude toward self, attitude toward others in the same reference group, attitude toward other minorities, and attitude toward the white majority. These five stages, conformity, dissonance, resistance and emersion, introspection, and synergetic articulation and awareness, describe the process of moving from self-deprecating attitudes and desire to assimilate with the dominant white culture toward a balanced respect and appreciation for all cultural groups and a selective appreciation of the dominant culture.

Ponterotto and Pedersen (1993) analyzed the minority theories identified here and identified four encompassing stages: Identification with the white majority; awareness encounter and search; identification and immersion; and integration and internalization.

Lewin initially proposed that identity development is inevitably impacted by environment. (Mosak. 1989). For black students matriculating in predominantly white institutions the experience of being a member of a numerical minority group may present challenges to the development of a positive black racial identity (Wilson & Constantine. 1999). Racial identity development models focus on the interaction of personal and racial group identity formation. Cross (1995) refined his 1971 racial identity development model that described five stages of Nigressence, or the "psychology of becoming black" (p. 94). The stages include pre-encounter, when awareness of difference is not an issue. After a racial encounter or series of encounters, the individual experiences internal conflicts and may become immersed in a new racial identity (immersion-emersion). Internalization and internalization-commitment are healthier levels of integration and acceptance. The process of Nigressence involves a progression from childhood naivete through a series of emotional struggles triggered by increasing social awareness. Successful identity development results in achievement of an inner peace that affords the individual at the internalized stage a sophisticated, open, expansive self-conception of blackness. The interpersonal dimension of Cross' concept is described according to how
effective the status allows the individual to be in bridging, or making connections to other experiences, groups, and individuals. Cross (1978) recognized that a primary source of self-concept is family because African Americans have a historical tradition of organizing the family and extended kinship patterns to provide support and emotional security.

Helms (1995) refined her earlier theories of White and People of Color Racial Identity Models. Helms assumed that groups experience “differential socialization due to racial (rather than ethnic) classification as well as differential reactions to that socialization” (p. 183). Separate from her White Racial Identity Model, the People of Color Racial Identity Model encompasses all non-white, socioracial groups, recognizing that the specific content of the statuses may differ between racial groups due to the power differences each group experiences in society. Her identity model is a derivative of Cross’s (1971) Nigressence model and Atkinson, Morten and Sue’s (1989) minority identity development model (Helms, 1995). Like Atkinson, Morten and Sue’s (1989) model, it was originally a guide to effective counseling interventions, a tool for promoting not only healthy personal development, but interpersonal development as well.

According to Helms, the general developmental issue for persons of color is surmounting their own internalized racism, and five mutually interactive, dynamic statuses, conformity, dissonance, immersion/emersion, internalization, and integrative awareness, describe and classify individual differences related to resolution of internalized racism. Elaboration of the theory (Helms, 1995) related it to interpersonal relationships, including those found in education, by proposing a racial identity interaction model. The interaction model distinguishes four types of relationships based on the statuses of those involved, parallel, progressive, regressive, and crossed. Helms intended this model to provide a tool for examining societal racial interactions so “that such situations may be rendered less mysterious and, thus, more manageable” (p. 196).
Two major studies that identified findings that are relevant to the psychosocial
development of black students because they shed light on the persistence of those
students are those of Tracey and Sedlacek (1984) and McEwen. Roper. Bryant. and
Langa (1990). Tracey and Sedlacek (1984) demonstrated the validity of eight non-
cognitive variables related to the success or failure of minority students by utilizing an
instrument that they designed. the Noncognitive Questionnaire, with the belief that non-
cognitive factors are especially important to minority students. The noncognitive
variables are: positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, ability to understand and deal
with racism, demonstrated community service, preference for long-range over short-
range goals, availability of strong support person. successful leadership experience, and
non-traditional knowledge acquired. They also found that identification with an
institution is a more important correlate for Blacks than for other students. Sedlacek
(1987/1999) suggested that the best students in U.S. colleges are Black students because
the typical black graduate from a predominantly white school may possess a wider range
of skills learned from handling the complex problems of racism than most other students.

McEwen. Roper. Bryant. and Langa (1990) proposed nine personal and social
dimensions of minority student development for inclusion in psychosocial theories of
development: Developing ethnic and racial identity. interacting with the dominant
culture, developing cultural aesthetics and awareness, developing identity. developing
interdependence, fulfilling affiliation needs, surviving intellectually, developing
spiritually, and developing social responsibility. Issues they identified as specific to
African American students emphasize the dimensions of interdependence and fulfilling
affiliation needs: The extended nature of the Black family and Black homelife (Willie,
1976): the unique educational/socialization role of the Black family (Willie. 1976); and
the oral tradition within the Black community (Hall & Freedle. 1975). These findings are
consistent with Cross (1978). For an African-American student, these dimensions may be
fatally unavailable at predominantly white institutions, where Bean and Okinaka (1984) found that *Black student alienation and lack of environmental support* were especially strong predictors of black student attrition.

*Theories of Moral and Intellectual Development*

Gilligan (1977) observed that Kohlberg overlooked women in the development of his moral reasoning structure by studying only men and therefore ignoring gender differences. She evaluated the male-normed theory against her own research with women. After comparing the differences in men’s and women’s patterns of moral decision-making, she concluded that two gender-related types of morality exist: An *ethic of justice* that is typical of men and an *ethic of care and responsibility* that is typical of women.

According to Gilligan, women are more inclined to link morality to responsibility, relationships, and social ties. The value of social ties changes and strengthens in each level of moral development. Responsibility that is overbalanced toward the self in the first level (where the focus of moral decision-making is *self and individual survival*) and toward others in the second level (where the individual moves from identifying goodness as *self-sacrifice to truth*) finds balance in third level relationships (where an ethic of *care as a universal obligation* positions self and others as moral equals to which an injunction against hurting must be applied). Collins (1990) criticized Gilligan for basing her theory on middle-class, white women but acknowledged that this female orientation converges with the Afrocentric women’s ethic of personal accountability.

Influenced by Gilligan, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) used Perry’s male-normed scheme as a foundation for studying women and included white women as well as women of color in their research. They identified five different perspectives from which women view reality and draw conclusions about truth, knowledge and authority: *Silence*, a position in which women experience themselves as
mindless and voiceless. *received knowledge* in which women conceive themselves as capable of receiving and reproducing knowledge. *subjective knowledge* which is intuited. *procedural knowledge* in which objective procedures are used to obtain knowledge. and *constructed knowledge* in which women view all knowledge as contextual and experience themselves as creators of knowledge. Reflecting Gilligan’s findings, these authors determined that men use an objective process for obtaining truth whereas women tend to find truth through understanding and connecting to others.

Based on the work of Perry (1970) and Belenky et al. (1986), Baxter Magolda studied the epistemological development of both male and female college students. She similarly concluded that college men more often use *impersonal*, autonomous, objective, rational modes of knowing and college women more often use a *relational*, connected, subjective mode of knowing. Her longitudinal study enabled her to proceed to a conclusion that post-college men and women converge in an advanced stage of *contextual* knowing, where relational and impersonal patterns are integrated (1995).

**Black Women**

This literature review has presented theories of psychosocial, intellectual and moral development that have been applied to various student populations. A few are specific to women and a few are specific to African Americans, but none have exclusively focused on African American, female college students. Therefore, the work of black woman intellectuals was consulted for information specific to black women and their education.

A scholar who defines herself as a black feminist and defines black feminism as “a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community” (p. 39). Collins (1990) believed that slavery shaped all subsequent relationships for black women. She described the oppression of black women according to interdependent dimensions. An *economic dimension* has resulted from the
exploitation of black women's labor. a *political dimension* has denied black women the rights that have been afforded white men. and an *ideological dimension* is comprised of negative stereotypical images of black women, primarily as mammies, jezebels, breeders or welfare mothers. The combined effect of these three dimensions has been repression of the black woman's *intellectual dimension*.

Although black woman intellectuals are relatively rare in academia (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1989). Collins has dug deeply to present the work of black women intellectuals who spoke as early as 1835, not from prestigious universities but from "alternative locations for knowledge production" (p. 16). Collins defined the illiterate Sojourner Truth as a black woman intellectual by using the following quote to demonstrate Truth's ability to think critically by deconstructing the concept of *woman*:

That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (Lowenberg & Bogin, 1976, as cited in Collins, 1990)

Collins (1990) identified another consequence of oppression, a contradictory result, one might say an ironic result. Being forced into self-contained communities provided a separate place where African-Americans could articulate an independent Afrocentric worldview. The knowledge produced in black communities was not only suppressed by the dominant group, it was hidden from the dominant group. Collins credited black women for utilizing this opportunity to foster their own independent identity development and that of their families.

According to Collins (1990), there are four dimensions to the epistemology that
black women use to assess knowledge claims: *concrete experience as a criterion of meaning, an ethic of caring, an ethic of personal accountability, and the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims*. The ethics of caring and responsibility and the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge suggest ties with the relational dimension of women’s epistemological development presented by Gilligan. (1977), Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), and Baxter-Magolda (1992). “For Black women, new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community” (Collins, 1990, p. 212).

Hooks (1981) believed that the struggle against domination for black women should not be limited to a battle against male chauvenism, but should be a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, including sex, race and class.

bell hooks’s unique contribution to intellectual life, American letters and Black thought is that of producing a challenging corpus of work which proposes a singular human struggle to be candid about one’s self and contestatory toward the dehumanizing forces in the world. Her works [are] yearning for a principled connectedness that promotes the distinctive self-development of each and every one of us. (hooks & West, 1991, p. 62)

**Summary**

This study began with the assumption that an in-depth look at an individual who was a successful student in spite of being a female, minority group member would uncover specifics that are not apparent in the existing, primarily quantitative, student development literature base. The literature review began with an overview of student development theory. Since the specific purpose of this study was to present, interpret, and analyze the life experiences of a professional, African American woman, the literature review proceeded to present relevant concepts from existing student development and the work of black woman intellectuals.
Because the qualitative methodology relies on an inductive approach in which theory emerges throughout the research process, this initial review is intended to provide a basic understanding of factors that may become relevant. Some of the theories presented here are expanded and additional theories are included in Chapter 4 as the process of narrative inquiry found them to be relevant.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Introduction

The selection of an appropriate methodology for the empirical portion of this study was based on the type of data sought as well as the purpose and objectives of the study. "Historically, qualitative methodologists have described three major purposes for research: to explore, explain, or describe the phenomenon of interest (Marshall & Rossman. 1999, p. 33). The purposes of this study are: to describe, to build a very detailed, thick description of a single student's life; to explore these experiences with the participant-narrator in order to discover how her subjective experiences contributed to her academic persistence; and to explain how her subjective experiences relate to existing paradigms of student development.

Rationale for the Qualitative Research Design

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stressed the importance of fitting the inquiry paradigm to the theory selected to guide the inquiry. The use of the qualitative inquiry paradigm to create, interpret and analyze a thick description of one relevant individual’s self-story allowed exploration of complex characteristics and factors, unavailable by quantitative methods, which impact minority college student persistence.

Quantitative studies must reduce human characteristics to numbers. This works well for academic variables that can be characterized by test scores. However, scores and numbers cannot represent potentially confounding aspects of those variables, especially those that differ due to unknown characteristics of subpopulations. For example, Nettles, Thoeny, and Gosman (1986) found that SAT scores, while valid, appear not to be as strong a predictor for black students’ as they are for white students’ cumulative college grade point average. Additionally, Suen (1983) found that dropout rates for whites related to academic variables, but such rates for blacks were related more to measures of social
estrangement. Social estrangement is difficult to measure quantitatively, as are other non-cognitive characteristics. Yet non-cognitive factors such as self-confidence, understanding of racism, and community involvement have been found to be more significant than academic ability in predicting black student persistence (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984).

As these examples suggest, "Traditionally conducted social science research has silenced many groups marginalized and oppressed in society by making them the passive object of inquiry" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 4). This study focused on a member of a doubly oppressed group, African American women, but traditional epistemological assumptions concerning how we arrive at truth simply are not sufficient to the task of furthering Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990). The traditional approach and epistemology that Marshall and Rossman and Collins refer to are those of the quantitative methodology and positivist epistemological perspective. Collins contended that because of the nature of Black women's identity it "seems unlikely that a Black woman would use a positivist epistemological stance in rearticulating a Black woman's standpoint" (p. 206).

In the field of education, typical survey instruments are quantitative and designed by researchers whose perspectives cannot possibly match those of all their participants. Attinasi and Nora (1996) described the dramatic diversification of the American college-going population and suggested that, because of this diversity, today's college students cannot be studied adequately by quantitative methods. They called for the use of qualitative methods, drawn from anthropology, that allow the researcher to be sensitive to frames of reference that may differ significantly from the investigator's own. Evans, Forney, and DiBrito (1998) concurred:

Qualitative approaches should be considered to examine psychosocial development, particularly as it occurs for members of different
multicultural populations...we need to start from scratch to determine what is important in the lives of people from different backgrounds. This goal is best accomplished using phenomenological techniques. (p. 52)

The phenomenological, or qualitative, methods of narrative inquiry, open-ended, creative interviewing; document analysis, life history, personal experience and self-story construction, participant observation and thick description, allow researchers to discover new frames of reference and start from scratch to put facts in context. These techniques also allow participants, even those considered to be underdogs, to speak for themselves. The qualitative researcher is able to examine, first-hand, the thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of the research participants within their setting and, thus, identify perspectives and details previously unknown to the researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Interpretivist, or qualitative, paradigms assume that social realities are constructed by the participants in social settings (Glesne, 1999). Qualitative researchers do not try to reduce multiple interpretations of participants to a norm, but rather try to understand the nature of the constructed realities by interacting and talking with participants about their perceptions and by seeking out the variety of perspectives (Glesne, 1999).

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) describe the unique contribution of the qualitative researcher:

Since qualitative researchers deal with multiple, socially constructed realities or “qualities” that are complex and indivisible into discrete variables, they regard their research task as coming to understand and interpret how the various participants in a social setting construct the world around them. To make their interpretations, the researchers must gain access to the multiple perspectives of the participants. Their study designs, therefore, generally focus on in-depth...interactions with relevant people...(p. 6)

The perspectives and experiences of those persons who are served by programs must be grasped, interpreted, and understood if solid, effective programs are to be created and maintained. Denzin (1989) identified a specific qualitative paradigm that he called Interpretive Interactionism. This approach asserts that meaningful interpretations of
human experience can only come from the persons who have thoroughly immersed themselves in the phenomenon they wish to interpret and understand (Denzin, 1989). It involves creative, open-ended interviewing in which the researcher and participant collaborate in the interpretation of life experiences, the full meaning of which can often only be gleaned by locating the story in the biography of the speaker (Denzin, 1989).

Denzin (1989) claimed that, to the interpretist, any instance of problematic social interaction, if thickly described and connected to a personal struggle, represents an experience that is proper subject matter for interpretive inquiry:

The slices, sequences, and instances of social interaction that are studied by the interpretivist carry layers of meaning, nuance, substance and fabric, and these layers come in multiples and are often contradictory. Some flow from other people's histories, and some are of the person's own making. The knowledge and control structures that lie behind these meaning experiences must be uncovered in an interpretive investigation. Every topic of investigation must be seen as carrying its own logic, sense of order, structure, and meaning. Like a novelist or painter, the interpretivist moves the reader back and forth across the text of his or her prose. In so doing, the researcher makes recognizable and visible a slice of human experience that has been captured. (p. 26)

Denzin (1989) recommended interpersonal methods, including open-ended, creative interviewing; document analysis; life-story; life-history; personal experience and self-story construction; participant observation, and thick description. Through interpersonal methods, the qualitative researcher is able to examine, first-hand, the thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of the research participants within their setting and, thus, learn perspectives previously unknown to the researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The interpretivist approach aims "...to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts: to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics" (Geertz, 1973, p. 28). Narrative inquiry is an interdisciplinary research approach that utilizes all of these methods and that additionally assumes people's realities are constructed through the
act of narrating their stories (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Narrative is a scheme by means of which human beings give meaning to their experience of temporality and personal actions. Narrative meaning functions to give form to the understanding of a purpose to life and to join everyday actions and events into episodic units. It provides a framework for understanding the past events of one's life and for planning future actions. It is the primary scheme by means of which human existence is rendered meaningful. Thus, the study of human beings by the human sciences needs to focus on the realm of meaning in general, and on narrative meaning in particular. (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 11)

In collaboration with a thoughtful, articulate, college graduate, narrative inquiry was used in this research study to make visible a slice of meaningful student experience. This "person-centered ethnography" (Wolcott, 1999, p. 156) involved compilation of more than 150 pages of interview transcripts, incorporation of field notes, and refinement of data into an orderly, readable life history. The resulting narrative was then analyzed in light of existing research findings that identify factors which have been related to student development, especially to African-American persistence in higher education.

In summary, the interpretivist methods used in this study inherently respect participants by allowing them to speak for themselves. They are interactional, they aid the participants by facilitating a search for personal meaning, and they are based on sophisticated rigor (Denzin, 1989). They provide practitioners and researchers an opportunity to compare the perspectives of student affairs professionals and the students themselves. They allow alternative perspectives of the persons most affected by policies and programs to evolve, possibly identifying strategic points for interventions that may improve policies and programming. Their findings can support or contradict existing theories, thus contributing to the refinement of those theories. Most importantly, this study utilizes qualitative methodology because, "No individual is ever just an individual. He or she must be studied as a single instance of more universal social experiences and social processes" (Denzin, 1989, p. 19).
Introduction to Methods of Data Collection

The phenomena of interest underlying the research questions is the current culture of American higher education and its impact on individual students. One fundamental assumption is that factors that affect college student development occur not just during the student years, but throughout life.

We may not know for years that a single lecture or conversation or experience started a chain reaction that transformed some aspect of ourselves. We cannot easily discern what subtle mix of people, books, settings or events promotes growth. Nor can we easily name changes in ways of thinking, feeling, or interpreting the world. But we can observe behavior and record words, both of which can reveal shifts from hunch to analysis, from simple to complex perceptions, from divisive bias to compassionate understanding. (Chickering & Reisser. 1993. p. 43)

Denzin (1989) calls those interactional moments that leave marks on people's lives *epiphanies* because they have the potential for creating transformational experiences. Recording experiences, thoughts, events, interactions, and emotions in detail helps identify epiphanies and their significance.

**Narrative Inquiry and Analysis**

Narrative inquiry was used to create and interpret the participant-narrator’s life story. This interpretive form of inquiry relies on an inductive approach in which theory emerges from the context of social phenomena (Brown. 1994).

*Life History, Personal Experience, and Self-Story Construction*

The participant narrator was asked to construct the story of her life because life histories go beyond providing specific information about events and customs of the past by showing how the individual creates meaning within the culture (Marshall & Rossman. 1999). Her story was captured and preserved because life histories picture a substantial portion of a person’s life and allow readers to enter into those same experiences (Marshall & Rossman. 1999). Once constructed, the pursuant analysis of the life story was appropriate because life histories also provide a fertile source of hypothesis that may
be tested, and they depict actions and perspectives that may be analyzed for comparative study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

An interdisciplinary method that goes one step further than the life history method in acknowledging and respecting the participant is narrative inquiry, because the subject is given a full voice and a record of that unique voice is preserved. Narrative inquiry views life holistically (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) and is useful for the purpose of this study because the method assumes that people’s realities are constructed through narrating their stories (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Marshall and Rossman (1999) identified the method as new to the social sciences, but long-used in the humanities because of its power to elicit voice. Thus, it gives previously silenced groups back their voice by documenting experiences using the narrator’s own words and style of speaking.

The authentic documentation of oral narrative is especially appropriate to the African American population, which values the way knowledge is presented. Collins (1991) demonstrated this emphasis on voice by describing the call-and-response discourse mode in traditional black church services, where minister and congregation use voice rhythm and vocal inflection to convey meaning. “The sound of what is being said is just as important as the words themselves” (p. 216).

Narrative analysis is also appropriate because it relies on an inductive approach in which theory emerges from the context of social phenomena (Brown, 1994). No hypotheses were developed to impose on the participant or to color the on-going analysis. Instead, the researcher listened open-mindedly to the participant-narrator: we were equal partners in a collaborative, on-going effort.

*Open-Ended, Creative Interviewing*

The interview strategy allows reconstruction of past events as well as expansion and verification of information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Open-ended interviewing assumes that meanings, understandings, and interpretations cannot be standardized
(Denzin. 1989) and requires working not from a preformed list of carefully phrased questions, but from a general list of information that the researcher wants or from a set of questions for which the researcher wishes answers (Denzin. 1989). Very open-ended questions were used to allow the narrator to choose direction and emphasis, and prompts were used only to focus responses on issues related to her self as a student. The narrator was talkative and required minimal prompting. Once interviews were recorded and translated into an oral history, her experiences were used to explore the existing body of student development literature in order to uncover interrelationships between her private struggle and public issues, between the universal and the singular (Denzin. 1989).

Three one-on-one interviews with the participant-narrator, one to four hours each and consisting of open-ended questions, began data collection for the oral narrative. Questions were extremely open-ended, and prompts directed the narrator’s discussion toward factors that potentially contributed to her educational success. The first interview began with annal construction, which allowed the participant-narrator to begin recollection, the researcher to gain a sense of the whole of her life: and both, together, to scaffold the narrator’s self-story (Clandinin & Connelly. 1994). Questions for three additional interviews (one including the narrator’s spouse) were drawn from the first interview and on-going consultation of the literature. Interviews were carefully transcribed by the researcher and particular attention was devoted to capturing the precise sounds of the narrator’s unique voice.

As Marshall and Rossman (1999) recommended, field notes and transcripts were shared with the narrator in subsequent interviews, questions were formed from previous transcripts, and the construction of the written record was completed collaboratively. This gave the narrator an opportunity to correct and authenticate the researcher’s interpretation of her perceptions and experiences.
Participant Observation

Participant observation in three settings of high importance to the participant-narrator also supplemented interviews: her home as the site of Sunday, extended family dinners, the site of her free health clinics, and her childhood home and community. The confidentiality of nurse-patient relationships prevented on-the-job observation. A field journal was maintained by the researcher throughout the study to provide an audit trail of the process.

The participant-narrator was asked to review the research text as writing proceeded in order to correct and authenticate the researcher’s interpretations of her perceptions and experiences.

Document Analysis

Written records provide an unobtrusive measure (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Marshall and Rossman (1999) stated that narrative inquiry may rely on journal records, photographs, letters, autobiographical writing, and other data and Bogdan and Biklen (1984) recommended supplementing the interview analysis with an analysis of personal documents. Interviews were corroborated against documents, including transcripts, preserved student tests and papers, and a Time magazine article, published during her senior year that featured her high school principal for winning a national award and included profiles of his top students, including the subject. Reviews of her photograph collection and her mother’s photograph collection provided opportunities for additional story-telling by the participant-narrator and her mother and further triangulation by the researcher.

Suitability of Researcher and Participant-Narrator

The researcher and participant-narrator were well-suited to this endeavor.

Narrative inquiry requires a great deal of openness and trust between participant and researcher: The inquiry should be a mutual and
sincere collaboration, a caring relationship akin to friendship that is established over time for full participation in the storytelling, retelling, and reliving of personal experiences. It demands intense active listening and giving the narrator full voice. (Marshall & Rossman. 1999, pp. 122-123)

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) put even more emphasis on the relationship, claiming that it embeds meaning and imposes form on the research text ultimately developed. Increasingly personal, revealing interactions indicate the existence of rapport (Glesne. 1999). Over a period of eighteen months before this study began, interactions between participant-narrator and researcher had become increasingly personal and revealing. This continued throughout the research process.

Denzin (1989) referred to interpretive interactionists as interpreters and required that they be good listeners who do not gossip or interrupt, but share experiences, thereby transforming the traditional interviewer-respondent situation into a sharing, conversational interaction. I chose this qualitative, interpretivist method because I am a listener and I had found a graduate with a story that needed to be heard. With a master's degree in counseling and ten years of varied counseling experiences. I have listened to psychiatric patients in order to write their case studies and I have taught intentional interviewing classes to community college students. After interviewing the participant-narrator in the summer of 1998 for a case study. I interacted with her frequently at the college where I work and she is an alum. The participant volunteered to tutor African-American students, joined the college's Equal Employment Opportunity Committee and provided support during the college's regional accreditation process. She is committed to education and when she learned of my interest in African American culture, she invited and accompanied me to her church.

Denzin (1989) further claimed that a listener should have a reason for listening. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) agreed. Like many interpretive interactionists, I am a practitioner. As a practitioner, I wanted to listen so that I can increase the effectiveness of
my work with African American students. I believed this woman had a relevant lesson to present.

The participant-narrator demonstrated a number of qualities that enhanced the relationship and that suited the purpose of the study. "The feasibility of a life history case study is mostly determined by the nature of the potential subject" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 57). The factors identified by Bogdan and Biklen are: 1) whether the participant lived through the kinds of experiences that the researcher wants to explore; 2) whether the participant has a good memory; and 3) whether the participant has time to give.

Evidence of rich, relevant subject material from an articulate, thoughtful source with a strong memory was plentiful. This included comments from college officials and faculty members who remember her seven years after graduation and stories she had told during preliminary interactions with the researcher. Stories of family influences, early events, and her own persistence in overcoming educational, career and personal obstacles. These stories are of special interest to researchers and practitioners in the discipline of education because this former student speaks from the unique perspective of a non-traditional, African American, female who succeeded in a predominantly white institution of higher education. Working minimal hours after a kidney transplant, the participant had time to give and wanted very much to give that time to something that might help others achieve a college education.

**Ethical Considerations**

"Doing narrative research is an ethically complex undertaking" (Josselson, 1994, p. 70). In creating and analyzing life histories, the human relationship is of prime importance (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Denzin, 1989; Glesne, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 1999) and thus ethical consideration of participants is equally important.

bell hooks (1990) claimed that dialogue is actually humanizing speech. Ochberg (1994) suggested that the stories people tell may be one way of reclaiming some measure
of agency: by taking charge of how the story is told, a narrator can make something of her experience and thereby of herself. The participant was not only given a voice, but was assisted in making meaning of her own life and the paths she has chosen thus far. For these reasons, I believe the qualitative method of narrative inquiry inherently respects the research participants.

"Value-free interpretive research is impossible" (Denzin. 1989, p. 23). This study relied on bicultural collaboration. While such a collaboration can be a very valuable tool, an assymetrical relationship exists when the interviewer is from a dominant group and the interviewee is a member of a minority group (Etter-Lewis. 1993). An important ethical consideration was my natural position in a socially privileged group versus the narrator's natural position in a socially oppressed group. "When we write about the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our action, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce and perpetuate domination" (hooks. 1989, p. 43). I agree with the conclusion drawn by hooks, that it is important for all of us to work at learning about one another, and that there is no better way than in concentrated study of another group. As many qualitative researchers (Denzin. 1989; Etter-Lewis. 1993; Glesne. 1993; hooks. 1989; Peshkin. 1986) recommended, I began Chapter Four with a description of myself and my prior interpretations. By describing who I am and clarifying my own meanings and values, readers may evaluate my interpretations in order to achieve their own interpretations. It is important to note that my "outsider" point of view is not necessarily detrimental, because sharing a cultural background with the participant could result in a contaminating lack of objectivity (Etter-Lewis. 1993).

A common ethical concern in quantitative research is participants' awareness of the researcher's purpose. Again, ethics is intrinsic to the constructivist paradigm because hiding the inquirer's intent would be destructive of the aim of uncovering and improving
constructions (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). All participants signed a consent form that explained the purpose of the study, discussed their right to end interviews or withdraw participation at will, and explained that privacy would be protected through the use of pseudonyms. All interviewees also reviewed the transcripts of their interviews. The Iowa State University Human Subjects Committee approved the research questions and proposed data collection processes before research began (See Appendix A).

Open, honest relationships between participants and researchers are of prime importance in qualitative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Etter-Lewis, 1996; Glesne, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Although details are important, delving more deeply than an interviewee desires usurps the participant’s authority and collaboration becomes coercion (Etter-Lewis, 1996). The few verbal and non-verbal indications of reluctance to share information were immediately addressed with the researcher’s reassurance that refraining from comment was an acceptable option. In one instance, at the participant-narrator’s request, a tape was destroyed immediately after transcription and a short side conversation was omitted from that transcript because she had inadvertently revealed a private piece of information about a mutual acquaintance.

Like Glesne (1993), “I readily acknowledge a need for inquiry that does not set out to serve research participants, but I am personally inclined toward research that contributes to the lives of the participants” (p. 3). Not only did this project allow the researcher and the subject to propose ideas for helping African American, female college students succeed. I believe the participant-narrator was reciprocated by the affirming documentation of her own experiences, choices, meanings, and values.
Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 300) noted that well-designed qualitative research should strive for trustworthiness rather than the more familiar, conventional quantitative constructs of reliability, validity, generalizability, and objectivity. The following section addresses strategies that were incorporated into this research design to enhance its quality. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified three guidelines to establish trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

Credibility

To ensure credibility (that the participant-narrator's views are accurately represented in the field and research texts), consensual validation, triangulation of sources and methods, and member checks were incorporated into the research design.

Triangulation (confirming data through multiple sources and methods) was accomplished via participant observation, document analysis, and interviews with significant others. A one-hour, audio-taped interview was conducted with the narrator's spouse who successfully and simultaneously completed the same army medic and nursing programs as the narrator. Audio-taped interviews of one hour or less were conducted with four former faculty members. Two additional faculty members submitted written comments on their impressions of the subject. Participant observation and informal interviews of family members took place at the apartment in inner-city Chicago where the subject was raised. All interviews were audio-tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. All participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and signed written consent forms (See Appendix A).

The member check, whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholding groups from whom the data were originally collected, is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility. If the investigator is able to purport that his or her reconstructions are recognizable to audience members as adequate representations of their own realities, it is essential
that they be given the opportunity to react to them. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314)

Member checks with the participant narrator herself, her spouse, her mother, her siblings and her former faculty members identified a strong consistency of response, which is an index of reliability (Langness & Frank, 1981). No contradictions were noted. Credibility was also assessed by asking the narrator the same questions repeatedly over a period of time (Langness & Frank, 1981) and consensual validation was provided by the subject-narrator.

As a final credibility check, three professional African American women, all practitioners in higher education, served as peer reviewers by evaluating the research process and final draft of the paper in an intensive, two-hour focus-group session. Each of the peer reviewers had advanced degrees in higher education and a minimum of ten years of experience as college professionals. These women were chosen according to two roles that they each assume. They are peers of the researcher because of their professional positions and expertise, yet they are members of the participant-narrator's social group because, with advanced degrees, each has also experienced great success in higher education as an African-American, female student. Dr. Mary Chapman, Executive Dean, Des Moines Area Community College; Dr. Wanda Everage, Provost, Drake University; and Betty Gause, M.A., Associate Dean of Students, Grandview College, were given an overview of the study followed by excerpts of original transcripts and related portions of the oral narrative. The resulting discussion allowed them to provide feedback evaluating my interpretations and analysis, and to provide additional suggestions for research and practice. The three women consistently identified with several themes of the oral narrative.

*Transferability*

Transferability means there is a connection between the current study and some future study. Interactionist investigations are particularizing and reject the impulse to
abstract and generalize (Denzin, 1989). Instead of making a few generalizations, thick description was used to reveal many details and nuances and preserve them for the contemplation of future researchers and practitioners. “Each case is unique, yet not so unique that we cannot learn from it and apply its lessons more generally” (Wolcott, 1995, p. 52).

**Confirmability**

Confirmability was achieved by preserving an audit trail made up of raw data, notes, transcripts, documents, drafts, and comments of peer reviewers. A methodological log was kept to document how research evolved and how data was collected, analyzed, interpreted, and reviewed, as well as other procedures and evidence of the research process. Field notes in the log were bracketed to identify and analyze codes, memos and concepts that relate to existing theories.

**Objectivity**

In any human interaction, “personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process” (Collins, 1990, p. 215). This kind of researcher subjectivity is a concern in quantitative, positivist research that values objectivity. However, Denzin (1989) claimed that objectifying the observational process divorces the researcher from the world under study. The constructivist nature of this research design values in-depth, long-term interaction that actually focuses on the role of subjectivity in the research process (Denzin, 1989; Glesne, 1999).

Because meaning can only be discovered by the observer’s actual participation in the world, interpretivists must become involved in the subject’s social world (Denzin, 1989). The purpose of the data gathering process was to gain access to the multiple perspectives of the participant-narrator and to understand and interpret them along with the participant-narrator (Glesne, 1999). Thus, subjective, interacting thoughts and feelings actually became tools of analysis.
Subjectivity requires the researcher to be aware of self and emotions. Glesne (1999) claimed that an awareness of emotions can help identify when subjectivity is engaged. Instead of trying to suppress my feelings, I used them to guide my inquiries. I rechecked perspectives and interpretations of my own and of the participant, and I shaped new questions through examining my assumptions. The goal was to explore my feelings to learn what they indicated about who I was in relationship to what I learned and what I perhaps kept myself from learning (Glesne, 1999).

"Interpretive research begins and ends with the biography and the self of the researcher..." (Denzin, 1989, p. 13).

[As] I increasingly came under the conviction that who I am, what I see, and what I conclude about what I see. I feel increasingly inclined to reveal enough about myself so that readers can make their own judgments about what I saw, what I missed, and what I misconstrued. (Peshkin, 1986, p. 15)

In order to allow readers to make their own judgments, I provided a brief introduction to myself and my purpose in Chapter 4, prior to presentation of the oral narrative.

**Managing the Data**

Managing the data included creating the oral narrative and interpreting the data.

*Creating the Oral Narrative*

The research of Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, Ph.D., Associate Professor of English at Western Michigan University, focuses on sociolinguistics and includes the creation of more than eighty oral narratives with African-American professional women (1993). In *My Soul is My Own: Oral Narratives of African American Women in the Professions*, she presents nine narratives and identifies her procedure for construction of an oral narrative. I chose to follow her procedure carefully. As many linguistic features as possible were initially transcribed, including false starts, repetitions and interruptions. This written text
was checked and double-checked against the tape. In the first phase of editing, the conversational/interactive nature of the interview was extracted so that narrative features could be organized to resemble a written text. Questions were removed, repetitions were deleted, and confusing passages were clarified with the participant-narrator (Etter-Lewis, 1993).

Recounting one’s life is not necessarily chronological (Etter-Lewis, 1993). Therefore the second phase of editing consisted of reordering the material and refining passages that were not understandable once the questions were removed and order was changed. The main concern of this draft “is to arrange information to effectively describe various episodes in the narrator’s life as clearly as possible” (Etter-Lewis, 1993, p. 134). Philosophical statements that lost context once questions were removed were strategically located to reinforce the narrator’s intent and meaning. Except for substituting fictional names for real ones, the narrator’s language was not modified and care was taken to preserve specific features of dialect.

The editing process, like the data collection and interpretation processes, was a joint endeavor, involving the narrator’s edits and clarifications through frequent phone calls and meetings.

**Interpretation**

Denzin (1989) identified six steps to interpretation: 1) framing the research questions; 2) deconstruction and critical analysis of prior conceptions of the phenomenon; 3) capturing the phenomenon, including locating it and situating it in the natural world and obtaining multiple instances of it; 4) bracketing the phenomenon, reducing it to its essential elements, and cutting it loose from the natural world so that its essential structures and features may be uncovered; 5) construction, or putting the phenomenon back together in terms of its essential parts, pieces and structures; and 6) contextualization, or relocating the phenomenon back in the natural social world.
Framing the Research Question

Denzin recommended that a researcher ask how it is that experiences occur. My first research question asks how this student managed to persist in spite of being a member of an underrepresented student population. Because her personal struggle is an example of an issue that affects millions of other college students, the second and third research question asks how her experiences relate to existing research findings.

Deconstruction

Deconstruction began with the examination of assumptions underlying the existing, predominantly quantitative, body of student development literature. The result of this analysis was identification of a need to supplement the quantitative literature base with more qualitative studies. Thus, a qualitative methodology was chosen for this study. As existing theoretical concepts appeared to be relevant, the related definitions, preconceptions, biases and prejudices were examined. For example, it was noticed that studies that focused on motivation of black college students often defined those students negatively as at-risk or disadvantaged problem students.

Bracketing

What Denzin called bracketing is an important step in any qualitative research process: the identification, categorization and analysis of data. Consistent with the qualitative research process, categories and variables were identified and modified as the study proceeded. Janesick (1994) described this process clearly:

The qualitative researcher uses inductive analysis, which means that categorized themes and patterns come from the data. The categories that emerge from field notes, documents and interviews are not imposed prior to data collection. Early on, the researcher will develop a system of coding and categorizing data. (p. 215)

The process is an iterative one; new understandings emerged throughout the research process. Emerging data was used to develop categories drawn from student
development literature and relate those categories back to the data, providing for elaboration and refinement of concepts throughout the research process.

Repeatedly occurring themes were given the following labels and bracketed in the raw transcript pages of the participants' interviews: Mama, the 'hood, leaving the 'hood/leaving Mama, faith and church, strength, dominance, black women's nagging/fussiness/outspokenness, black men, cheating men, marriage, education, K-12 experiences, high school principal, high school graduation, college, brother's death, father, sons, the military, prejudice, money, career goal of doctor, Dr. Cottrell (mentor), kidney disease, dialysis, sisterhood, self-esteem, connectedness, growth, going places, hunger, caring/caretaking, nursing, free clinics, houseguests, language, storytelling, heritage, desire, and discipline.

Data collected from corroborators (husband, six former faculty members) interviews and participant observation interactions with siblings, an aunt, her mother, and friends were bracketed. first, for adjectives describing the participant narrator and, second, for themes identified above. The numbers in parenthesis following each descriptor indicates the number of times the descriptor was mentioned, the second number indicates how many different interviewees used it: Intact value system (1/1), accommodating (1/1), friendly (7/5), always had a smile (2/2), good sense of humor (2/2), realized how she came across to others (1/1), adaptable (1/1), made people laugh (1/1), respected (3/3), helpful and caring (4/1), higher IQ (1/1), knew her own boundaries/weaknesses (2/1), asked for help (4/3), someone you want to be around (4/4), struggler academically (5/4), open to feedback (2/2), not defensive (1/1), disliked math (3/2), persistent (1/1), motivated/goal directed (9/4), desired growth (1/1), Christian (4/3), strong mother evident (1/1), supportive family evident (5/4), supportive husband evident (4/4), able to prioritize (1/1), firm (1/1), disciplined (2/2), willing to devote extra time to study (2/2), good role model/peer helper (8/5, plus she was elected by classmates for role-
model award), able to call others to account (3/3), able to cope with problems (1/1), good self concept (1/1), driving force for peers (1/1), valued education (1/1), well-known by others (2/2), respectful (2/2), dressed-up (1/1), you wanted to cheer for her (1/1) friend of faculty (2/2), had rapport with everyone (3/2), leader (1/1), approachable (3/2), held high expectations of self (1/1), you just knew what was going on with her (1/1), hard worker (5/3), loved (1/1), taught as much as she was taught (4/2), positive, contagious attitude (2/2), mature (4/2), involved (4/4), creative (1/1), able to apply theory (2/2), committed (1/1), able to intuit needs of others (1/1), able to redirect others (1/1), happy (1/1), community-oriented (1/1), spirited (1/1). No adjectives with strong negative connotations were used by faculty members.

Construction

Building on bracketing, the emergent themes were classified, ordered, and reassembled into a coherent whole. These were then summarized as six main themes: desire, mama, family, church, culture, connectedness.

Working with the raw data through the processes of bracketing and construction, it was discovered that the narrator referenced voice often. Bracketing words and phrases in the 121 pages of transcripts identified over 1500 instances of voice indicators, such as: “He said”, “she say”, “I go”, “I told you”, “cussin”, “like I said”, “now, you talk about brilliant”. “I remember at her funeral tellin her”, “you look in their eyes and you see...silence”, “she ain’t never lied”. Included in this count were the dramatic voice changes the narrator often used in her storytelling to indicate change of speaker. In many instances, she answered a question by repeating a conversation or telling a story in which she had answered that question with someone else, so her responses were dialogues within our larger dialogue. Voice, then was added as the seventh theme used to focus the analysis.
Contextualization

In an analysis of themes and findings, the structures disclosed during bracketing and construction were related to the social context of black women in America, particularly in higher education. Through analysis, the narrative became a thick description, presented in her terms, with her language, her emotions, and our interpretations.

The intent of contextualization was to show how lived experience altered and shaped the educational achievement of the participant-narrator. In this study, the completion of the oral narrative was the first step of contextualization; a comparison to existing theory was the second. A search for insights into African American student persistence, by locating meaning in the experiences of one particular individual who interacted with the institution of higher education, was the goal of this interpretive research study.

Summary

In summary, the study chose to forego traditional research methodology in favor of a qualitative methodology that would enable insights into personal meanings and insights of the participant. To maintain academic rigor, procedures to ensure trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, and confirmability were implemented. Ethical considerations were addressed and a detailed discussion of researcher objectivity was presented. Procedures for managing the raw data and creating an oral narrative were outlined. Chapter Four presents the resulting thick description of the participant-narrator's story.
CHAPTER 4
PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

Chapter 4 presents the oral narrative, findings and an analysis of the data that emerged during this collaborative, qualitative research effort. This chapter is presented in three sections. The first section introduces the researcher, the participant-narrator, and the collaborative partnership. The second section presents the oral narrative. Section three responds to the research questions with analyses of the themes that emerged during the research process.

The Collaboration

The narrative analysis method is useful to this study because of its power to elicit voice (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), because it acknowledges that people’s realities are constructed through narrating their stories (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), and because it relies on an inductive approach in which theory emerges throughout the process (Brown, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Thus, analysis was an integral part of the study and included both the researcher and the participant-narrator in an on-going, collaborative effort.

Narrative inquiry requires a great deal of openness and trust between participant and researcher. The inquiry should be a mutual and sincere collaboration, a caring relationship akin to friendship that is established over time for full participation in the storytelling, retelling, and reliving of personal experiences. It demands intense active listening and giving the narrator full voice. (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, pp. 122-123)

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) put even more emphasis on the relationship, claiming that it embeds meaning and imposes form on the research text ultimately developed.

A mutual, sincere collaboration, akin to friendship, seemed evident in the easy, natural progression of the data collection. Candid information was volunteered and
thoughtful reflection was carefully voiced from the time of the narrator's willing agreement to participate. After the third interview I overheard her. from another room. refer to me as "my girlfriend, Katie". The effect of the strengthened relationship was also evident in her first telling me that she hates shopping in malls because of the crowds but. in a later interview. revealing that the real reason she avoids malls is the insulting scrutiny of storeclerks who seem to see her skin color as a threat to inventory control. In our final meeting, her son incidentally asked her why she hates malls and she told him that I am the only person who knows the real reason.

Her acceptance enabled me to access her family members as sincere corroborators. thus enhancing the trustworthiness of the study with solid member checks. The consistency of their descriptions confirms the genuineness of their responses. Two brothers, two sisters, her mother and an aunt all responded to my initial inquiry by describing the narrator as "book-smart but not street-smart". laughed, then explained that "not street smart" meant she's so kind to people that she enables them to take advantage of her. On the way to Chicago she warned me that one sister is prejudiced against whites. On the way home. she expressed surprise that the same sister showed me what seemed to be a high sign of respect. she "fussed" at me and. even higher, gave me a personal possession. In all participant-observation interactions with her family of origin, her siblings occasionally interrupted the dialogue to tell me to write something down. Ten days after the visit. the narrator reported that her mother had called and asked about "Little-bit", meaning me. I was extremely flattered that I had earned her mother's concern and a nickname.

_The Researcher_

Although subjectivity is scorned by quantitative researchers. in qualitative research it is valued for its role in meaning-making, as long as researchers take care to forewarn the reader who the ego is (Peshkin, 1980). By presenting a picture of myself, I
identify the roots of my assessments, and extend to the reader a respectful invitation to join the collaboration. It is especially important to introduce myself in this study because of our cultural differences (Etter-Lewis, 1993; hooks, 1989; Peshkin, 1980): I am a white woman, raised in a tiny, primarily Norwegian-Lutheran town, studying an African-American, Pentecostal Baptist woman who was raised in inner-city Chicago. These differences naturally affected my interpretations.

“Scholars who write about an ethnic group to which they do not belong rarely discuss in the introductions to their work the ethical issues of their race privilege, or what motivates them, or why they feel their perspective is important (hooks, 1989. p. 43). Research for this study gave me a great respect for hooks and I want to comply with her request: “I would want them to be clear about why she wanted to write about them and I would suggest careful examination to ensure that the perspective did not reflect racial bias” (hooks, 1989. p. 43).

I am not an authority. I simply have liked the few African American women that have, fortunately, come into my white, middle-class world, and what I have learned from them has facilitated my own development. Raised in the late 1950’s and 1960’s in a tiny Minnesota town, a town so isolated that the great-grandchildren of immigrants, including my parents, still spoke Norwegian. I did not see an African American until my senior class trip to Washington, DC. Another five years passed before I moved to a small city and had my first opportunity to interact with an African American coworker.

I became aware of the world by watching Huntley and Brinkley and Barbara Walters describe the Viet Nam war, the protests, and the civil rights movement on fuzzy black-and-white television. Watching the evening news in our noisy, protected living room, I wondered why skin-color would upset so many people.

I initially became acquainted with black women only through their books. My personal observation was that they possessed a strength, richness and color not just of the
skin but of the spirit. My mother, like their mothers, bequeathed great strength to me. but I did not know that until I was thirty-something, and that’s when I began to read and love Zora Neal Hurston, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison. They conveyed, in beautiful characters and words, a strength that was new and vital to me. My own strength at that time was still slippery, hard to hang on to. I learned of confident strength from the grandmother who drew it from a hymn, demonstrating “why the caged bird sings” (Angelou, 1969). I learned a new level of compassion in an unorthodox letter to God written by the man who turned a homely little black girl’s eyes blue (Morrison, 1970). I found my own epiphany through Zora Neal Hurston’s (1927) words, when I realized that I could find these qualities in myself:

But in the main, I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red, and yellow. Pour out the contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small things priceless and worthless. A first-water diamond, an empty spool, bits of broken glass, lengths of string, a key to a door long since crumbled away, a rusty knife-blade, old shoes saved for a road that never was and never will be, a nail bent under the weight of things too heavy for any nail, a dried flower or two still a little fragrant. In your hand is the brown bag. On the ground before you is the jumble it held – so much like the jumble held in other bags, could they be emptied, that all might be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without altering the content greatly. A bit of colored glass more or less would not matter. Perhaps that is how the Great Stuffer of Bags filled them in the first place. (pp. 1-2)

The first African American professional women I met (yes, when I was thirty-something), conveyed their own strengths with a grace and dignity that confirmed the beauty and truth of what I was learning.

And all this awe and wonder did not fit with the statistic that African American females are not only underrepresented in college student populations, they have a much higher attrition rate than white females (American Council on Education, 1998). To my dismay, this statistic was magnified at my college of employment.

And then I met the participant-narrator. In the two years I knew her before the
study began. I had heard only positive descriptions of her and had never seen her act with a negative attitude. She was an alum of the college where I directed the student services department and she was highly recommended by faculty as a volunteer tutor and recruiter for the college. I called her to request assistance with three struggling African American students. I met her the day she was praising God because a potential kidney donor’s tissue matched hers. I was with her the day she learned the transplant would not happen but she was praising God anyway, because the donor’s own kidney problems had been discovered in time to save the donor’s life. She praised God when she was blind because she knew her eyesight would return as soon as medications balanced her blood sugar level and, indeed, two weeks later she was tutoring my students again.

Not only did I believe this indomitable spirit needed to be captured and preserved, she clearly valued her own education and demonstrated her personal mission to education and to helping others succeed in college. I was absolutely certain that she had many lessons to teach: lessons in attitude, lessons in perseverance, lessons in care and responsibility, lessons in strength. I wanted to learn them and I wanted to preserve them and I wanted to share them and I wanted to compare them to the lessons of the best scholars in American higher education. Throughout this study, she was my teacher and I was loving the learning.

The Participant-Narrator

A few pre-study conversations with the participant-narrator convinced me that narrative analysis was the perfect method for this research project. Since she was typically thoughtful and expansive in her responses, I was convinced that the meaning-making central to this interpretive method would occur. I could ask a simple, open question, watch her answer unfold, and give it direction with minimal prompting.

The participant-narrator presented her self and her story in the following oral narrative. A beautiful woman with a smile that I could feel, her weight and facial features
fluctuated with the level of medication in her system (almost a year after her kidney transplant. she took 27 pills every day). A platform of needle marks and scar tissue. a dialysis leftover. literally buzzed in her left inner arm. Her conversation was full of storytelling and she was a master storyteller. sometimes funny. sometimes poetic. sometimes sad. but always dramatic. Her silence was as full as her speech. and sometimes she leaned back and held the silence close to her. Most of the time. her laughing spirit danced with her waving. talking hands. “Alleluia”s and “Praise-the-Lord”s sprinkled her sentences and listeners seemed to want to stay and listen some more.

Her voice. smooth and rich as warm caramel. at times reflected politically correct English. but at other times. what she called “ghetto English”. In one interview. she claims her style of speech as part of “who I am” (see p. 84). Because her speech held meaning for her. I transcribed the tapes personally. sometimes rewinding a passage several times to re-listen and carefully spell each word as she spoke it. As Etter-Lewis (1993) recommended. redundancies and false starts were deleted. confusing passages were clarified with the narrator. and portions were reordered to present the story chronologically. Exclamation points are plentiful because her voice was generally emphatic. and it is safe to assume that most exclamation points were accompanied by pleasant laughter. a few by tears. Her narrative is presented here as authentically as possible.

**The Oral Narrative**

I don’t want to explain it as doom and gloom cuz we had a wonderful childhood. Wonderful! I think we were the only family in our southside Chicago neighborhood that had a father inside. We had five girls and three boys. We were happy but I remember it being real crowded!

Our apartment had one bedroom. a kitchen. and living room. Mom. Dad and my
youngest sister stayed in the bedroom. My three brothers slept on a couch that let out and four of us girls slept in a bed in the living room. I would sleep next to the wall, and every morning I would wake up with an impression on my face from the piece of windowsill that stuck out!

Every little neighborhood has stories about ghosts and ours was a story about this milkman from horse and buggy times. He was deliverin’ milk and crashed and died but you could still hear his horse hittin’ the cobblestone streets of Chicago. Honest to God, in the early part of the mornin’, we’d hear this clickety click, clickety, clickety, clickety click. It was eerie! I was very close to the window so I could hear it especially well in the summertime. The window had no screen so my biggest fear was that I was gonna fall out this window! In the spring it was wonderful, though. The rain would come in and fall on my face and feel so wonderful!

My father was born in 1919. At age three he was helpin’ his mom pick cotton and they never sent him to school. He had lots of brothers and sisters. I wanna say nineteen like my mama’s family, and all of them worked so only the younger ones learned to read. He wanted people to think he could read so he would hold up a newspaper like he was reading it. Sometimes I would have to tell him he was holding it upside down and he would say, “Oh, shit, Jenay!” As I learned my ABC’s I tried to teach him his ABC’s. I remember him getting very frustrated. When he got his license renewed, he knew the signs pretty well but he needed somebody to read the actual test to him. I guess he was embarrassed by it, because he didn’t tell them that he couldn’t read and he flunked it. He passed it the second time and was so proud. He came in and said, “Jenay, look what I got!” He had his license.

I don’t know if it was unusual for my father to be unable to read cuz there were very few men in our neighborhood. It never really bothered me that he couldn’t read cuz I understood that he had to do what he had to do. He had to take care of us. I just felt sad
for him. I had a feel of what it was like when I was in Germany and picked up something that was labeled in German. I didn’t know what it was! That must be an odd feelin’! He could find his way out of hell and back but he couldn’t read.

My mom is over ten years younger than my dad. She finished high school in Kingston, Jamaica. I actually think my mom was my daddy’s mail-order bride. She won’t admit it. I asked her, “Mama, how old were you when you came here? Wait a second, how old? And you just met him the same day you got here, and you married? How is that?” She just gave me half-baked answers. She would only say that she used to be very bad and very wild!

I thought my mother could do no wrong and she was the wisest person on this earth. She’s an amazin’, remarkable, funny, crazy woman; a tall, graceful woman. One minute she’s very elegant, the next minute she’s Bozo! One funny time in church this woman was worshippin’ and shoutin’ and her wig went flyin’ in the air. My mother, of course, bein’ my mother, picked it up and held it between her thumb and forefinger, dangling it in the air. So the woman lost the Spirit, put her hair back on, and said, “Ain’t nothin’ wrong with that!”

Mother said, “That’s why you got to pin it down, darlin’, pin it down!”

In church, my mother is a runner. When she get in the Holy Spirit she runs toward the preacher! He be preachin’ and runnin’ from her and all the ushers be tryin’ to catch up with her and stop her! She’d get to runnin’ and chargin’ like a bull at him!

Our family was considered big time because we had a father and our father made good money. He had been a construction worker from age nineteen. He also had alotta kids and he was not money-smart. He never saved his money. He drank his money up. He was a good provider, though, and took care of the bills first. But his family has a spice for life and he lived up to it! When we were in San Francisco, my ninety-year-old aunt danced ‘til 3:00 in the morning at a B.B. King concert! “Hey, B.B.!” (squeal, growl)” She
was a fool, girl! Mama said their whole family just got that zest for life.

I don’t know if there’s a word for how my mother treated my father. When we was little, she loved him dearly. But then, as he started creepin’, she fell outta love with him and it became a contract marriage. She told us all the stuff my father had did! He was a whore-dog but I was little and daddy crazy. That’s Daddy, he crazy, you know! I never thought my father was perfect, cuz I knew his sins. When I was in first grade, I was paged to go to the principal’s office. When I got there, there was a kindergarten girl there and she had the same name as me so we both had responded to the page. The principal had two birth certificates with the same name and the same father’s signature, so he wanted to see whether there was a mistake. So that’s how I found out I had a half-sister! But Daddy did the very best of what he knew how and part of it may have been that he had to screw everybody in town. But he was always there for us. Always! We never wanted for nothin’. We may not have had everything we wanted but never wanted for nothin’.

Every single time my father went out he would ask my mother, “Molly, come on. Let’s go out and have some fun.” And every single time my mother would go, “No, I gotta fix my hair. I got church tomorrow. I ain’t gonna be drinkin’ and carryin’ on!” And he would always go by hisself. I’m not trying to justify his behavior; I honestly think that’s why he played around.

My father would tell her, “Molly, we ain’t dead.” and he would go and live his life while mama would sit there doin’ what she doin’. If my daddy died today I know in my heart that he enjoyed his life. It may not have been what everyone thought it shoulda been but it was his one and only life so he’s the one that hasta answer to it.

My father only whooped us once in our life. In line. Assembly line. He came home early and said, “Jenay, you all be quiet. I got a headache.” And we never used to listen to our father cuz he never whooped us. We kept the radio on and we just had a ball!
He said, "Jenay, I told you all to be quiet."

We kept on goin'. He came out. He lined us up. My father had very big feet. He had this green houseshoe. Ooooh, I can see that shoe! It used to be a regular shoe but he made it into a houseshoe. He had us all lined up and we had to keep comin' around. And we learned. Cuz he had never whooped us and he has never whooped us since.

Mama had good taste and our apartment was pretty and very clean. She used to make us mop on our hands and knees so the mop water wouldn't touch her white walls. She enjoyed plantin'. One day she just got up and said she was sick of lookin' at all this ugliness and she started plantin'. She began a chain reaction where other women started diggin' up stuff. Next thing we knew everybody was having gardens and it made the neighborhood look so much prettier.

She cleaned white folks' houses and they took care of her. We used to go with her sometimes. Oh, man! I especially enjoyed going to those high rises with bay windows so I could go from window to window and look clear across Lake Michigan! I would say, "Look, Ma! Look! You can see dis! You can see dat! It's just huge!" I used to look at all the pretty things in their homes. A couple had minks. Mother wouldn't let me try them on. But I would rub my hand through them. I told mama I would buy her one someday. She say, "Okay, NayNay."

All the rich white people had degrees hangin' on their walls. My puny mind equated that. "Now these are rich people and they got degrees. We poor people. We don't have degrees. If I get those degrees. I can have somebody clean my house and my mama won't have to clean house no more!"

Let me tell you about one time I was helpin' my mama clean this guy's house. This was the first time goin' to this house and me, bein' nosy, I'm goin' through his closet and I see all these robes and pointed hats, you know, them Catholic hats that they wear that kinda got a point to it? And I said, "Mama! It's a clansman!" My mother comes
runnin' and she said. "That bastard's a clansman!" I remember this because he was a lawyer and he had DePaul University law school degrees on his wall. And he came home for lunch and we're thinkin' he gonna kill us. And my mother say, "Sir, we got a question." She say, "Uh, why do you have these white robes?" She say, "You ain't no fuckin' clansman, are you?" And this man fell all into the closet laughin'! He said, "Polly, I'm a Catholic priest!" Later we thought, yeah, that made sense. We had seen Catholic priests on television.

That was right after the first time I experienced prejudice. I was with my grandma in Mississippi. I never shall forget that. We were in a pool and this little boy said, "That nigger just splashed me!" I said, "What did you say?" He was a little boy, littler than me! He say, "You heard me, nigger." I was so stunned. I remember tellin' my Grandma, "Grandma, that boy just called me a nee-ger." He had a southern accent, "neeee-ger", and my grandma said, "Come on baby. Let's go." And we got out of the pool.

I remember that because I had never encountered nuthin' like that. It wasn't that I didn't know it existed. I grew up with Martin Luther King and all but I was protected in an all-black neighborhood. It's one thing when a black person calls another black person a nigger. You hear that alot. It's a totally different thing when a white person calls you nigger.

Oh, I loved school! I think I was six when I started school. I was real good at school. But they discovered I was dyslexic so I had to have special classes until sixth grade. To this day, I still make a bunch of letters wrong. One of my nursing instructors called me to her office and asked if I was dyslexic. All my life I had considered that to be like bein' retarded! I was afraid I would have to take special classes and it just blew me away that she had spotted it. So I told her I'm not any more. I'm cured. I had dyslexia from kindergarten to sixth grade but I'm cured now. She said that people can't be cured from dyslexia. I said that everybody else don't be cured, but I am! I told her, "Well, I
used to be. Not no more. That was years ago. I took a pill for it!"

I had really good teachers. I was very blessed. Some of the teachers was white.
Majority of ‘em was black though. We didn’t realize we were disadvantaged. I just
thought that’s what school was, sharing old books, tired old teachers!

Oh, I loved school. I was really good in school, too, after they found, thank God,
the problem with dyslexia in kindergarten. I loved everything about school even though
every day I would get chased home. My schoolmates chased me cuz I was nerdy and too
smart. I thought I was smart. They thought I was smart. The teachers thought I was smart.
I really wasn’t smart. I just knew how to con better than the rest of them! God, they
would chase me!

It got to the point that my mother had to hire the baddest boy in school, Squire.
She paid him to walk me home and to say that he was my cousin. Nobody dared mess
with me after that cuz Squire was cussin’ teachers and slappin’ principals in third grade.
He followed me ‘til I graduated from elementary school.

I turned against my friend Shari so I could be hip. She had cancer and she wore
this really old-fashioned-woman wig. The hip kids told me they would be my friends if I
pulled off her wig. I wanted to be hip and I didn’t want to be chased home and have a
body guard. I remember we was walkin’ and the usual crowd was behind me, but they
wasn’t chasin’ me. They was waitin’ for me to pull off this girl’s wig. I stopped and I say.
‘Shari!’ She turned around and I pulled off the wig. I didn’t think about her, cuz they
was cheerin’ me on in the background and I was just wavin’ her little wig and tears was
runnin’ down her eyes.

Her face, that look of betrayal, will go with me until the day I die. She looked at
me and said, ‘Jenay, how could you?’ I cannot talk about. We was never friends again.
That’s one I’ll have to answer to the Lord for. ‘Well Jenay, why did you pull of Shari’s
wig?’
"Well, Sir..." I gotta give a good answer. I know that!

The kids still chased me until Squire would say something.

When I was ten my brother, Leon, died. He was nineteen and he used to call me 'one eye' cuz I got a weak eye. "You one-eye dog!" He died December 23, the last day of school before winter break. I was going on a field trip that day, to see The Connecticut Mouse and The Benjamin Franklin House. My mother was in her room. the phone rang, and I heard my aunt say, "Oh, no! Oh, no!"

So I went to my mother. She was in bed, curled up in a fetal position, and her hair was stickin’ up. I thought that can’t be my beautiful, tall, skinny mother! She looked so lost, all balled up. So I knew he had died when my aunt hung up that phone I wouldn’t let her tell me. I ran out the door and I went on my field trip.

When we came back to school for lunch. I was in the cafeteria. Everybody knew that my brother was in the hospital because he had been found unconscious with three of his friends in a garage. They had been fixing a car with the engine running and the door closed. We had honestly never heard of carbon monoxide. One of the cooks asked, "Jena-. How’s your brother?"

I said, "Oh. he’s dead."

The nurse had told my mother that his last word was "Mama." and that he cried. She gave my mother a kleenex with his tear on it. I always see, not the death or the funeral, but that image of my mother. She just looked weird. It’s okay for my hair to stick out but not my mother’s.

Before Leon died he would get off work at 4:00. About a week or two after his funeral my mother got up one afternoon and she opened the front door. She had stayed in bed since the funeral so we thought, "Oh. we got our Mama back!" But she opened the door. We all looked at each other and she went and sat down with the biggest smile on her face. About an hour later she got this real lost look and closed the door. She did that a
couple a times before we told our daddy. The next day he came home from work early and, like clockwork, at 4:00, she opened the door. My father said. “Molly, what are you doing?”

“I’m waiting for Leon.”

My father thought maybe she needed a change so we moved into the apartment that she is in now. It was a four-bedroom, two-bath apartment and we thought we was so rich! We was bangin’ on them pretty cabinets! Everything was new cuz the place was just built and we thought we was it! And it had an intercom! We’d play and say. “Go downstairs! I’m gonna buzz you in!” I’d punch the button. “Hello, is that you, Jasmine?” We just acted-a-fool and we were so happy! We didn’t each have a room but it was two to a room where it had been four to a bed!

Anyway, junior high wasn’t bad and high school was even better. My high school was all black except for the teachers. In my senior year, our principal won “Principal of the Year”. When this principal came in, our school had the lowest reading scores in the nation, or in Chicago, and by the time he left we had the highest. Since I was one of the top students they did a profile on me and and a couple other kids. It was in a Life Magazine. Yeah, there’s a big ole picture of me!

So dey transferred him to a white school. And we got dis Lincoln look-a-like but by that time I was gone. He was so scared of dem black kids it wasn’t even funny. He was white. My mom say, “Jenay, if you say ‘boo’ he may start runnin’.” Lincoln didn’t last long, just long enough for everything to go back down.

When I was at the airport on my way to San Antonio I saw Principal Smith. I understood exactly why they transferred him so I asked him. “Why you let them transfer you from that school?” He said. “The offer was good.”

I was a popular nerd but I wasn’t a popular hip person. I wanted to be hip but it wasn’t in me. I tried out for all the hip stuff: modern dance, pom-pom, cheerleader. You
know the myth that all blacks have rhythm is a lie! I have no rhythm whatsoever! So I joined the other things. I joined the newspaper, math club, science club, English club, and I was Junior Business Manager. But I had fun. I was real popular in that sense. Now all the popular people are strung out so it pays to be a nerd!

My mom wanted me to do a lot of things. I was the only one of her children that humored her. She wanted me to be an opera singer. I took five years of voice. She wanted a ballerina. I took ballet. She wanted a tap dancer. I took tap. She wanted a tennis star. I took tennis. I took jazz. I took piano. I took organ. I played the flute. Every week she wanted something different and I was the only one that would say, "Yes, mother. I’ll do it." And I did it. I went to all the stupid classes. I enjoyed voice cuz I do love singin’ but I didn’t have a body for ballet. One day I was leapin’ and my boobs was bouncin’ all over the place and folks was laughin’ and I said, "Mom, it ain’t for me!" It was fun but it got to a point where I didn’t meet her expectations. "Oh, Jenay, you’re not practicin’."

"Well, ma. I’m only taking the class to shut you up!"

I finally settled down with the violin in third grade and eventually played the violin for a year in the Bloomington Symphony. It was pretty cool! I was the very last chair but I was in it! It wasn’t a big orchestra but I was in it! He Hee!

Mother and I was the only ones that went to church. Remember. I humor my mother! My Dad went sometimes if he weren’t too hung over from Saturday. A couple times he went hung over from Saturday. My brother David went ‘til he was about twenty, but nobody else would go.

We were so sharp the Holy Spirit couldn’t come near us! "Don’t come near us, Spirit, you may get hurt!" Me and my mother would sit in church like we was black goddesses. The preacher would say, “Sister Aiken, you and your daughter is sharp!”

"We know! Thank you! Holy Spirit can’t even touch us! We too sharp!" Me and her. girl. you would think we were black queens. walkin’ into church just a little bit late
so they could turn around and see us. I did not attend Sunday school becuz that interfered with our beauty time. One time the pastor asked my mother how come we didn’t come to Sunday school and we looked at each other! We couldn’t tell him. “Well, we’re too busy getting beautiful.” I forget what excuse she gave him.

My mother wears a duster on weekdays. but when Sunday comes, she will put on that Sunday outfit and become a queen! She will flaunt and her voice and her posture will change. All of us are hams like that. My sister, Jasmine, thinks she’s a nubian goddess!

I think I know why we did that. Everything else around us was so ugly. The one thing we really had that gave us a little peace was making believe we was gorgeous goddesses! That was one thing that we could control and it gave us pleasure.

I started going to church cuz my mother was by herself but then I found that I liked it and I stayed goin’. When I got older I would be at church all day. ‘til 1:00 the next mornin’. and my mother wouldn’t bat an eye cuz she know I be with a group of church people. In Chicago the black churches have broadcasts. We would go from church to church to hear each broadcast and not get home until early Monday mornin’. Oh, girl, we used to have so much fun! It was just a group of young adults and usually this guy named Tony, who I had a wonderful crush on, would have the car.

When I was seven my brother and I worked in the cleaners for fifteen dollars a week. The woman we worked for gave us money out of her pocket cuz she sat on her ass. Me and my brother did most of the work. When the clothes came in we put the bags on ‘em and put ‘em in 1-2-3 order. He did the cash register. I took the ticket and found the number and brought the clothes. But becuz the clothes was heavy I would drag ‘em and they would get dirty but people would just smile and take it and give us a tip!

From the time I was ten until I was in my early twenties. I worked summers and after school for a white dentist. It started so simple. I went in there for a toothache and he said I would need a root canal. My mother said, “I don’t have that kinda money for no
root canal.”

“Well, does she know how to file? I need somebody to help file stuff.”

I was excited! “Yeah. I know how to file. I been the teacher helper and dis and dis and dis and dat...”

“It’s gonna cost about a-thousand-some bucks to pay for that. Well, she can work for me and work it off.” It woulda took me a long time but three or four months into it he started to pay me.

He taught me a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot. I was takin’ panarexes. x-rays, and I could develop the x-rays. I flooded the place a couple times (laughter). I put some kind of stain on his expensive desk. I swear I thought the bottle said furniture polish. That’s the damn dyslexia. I was gonna help Dr. Barker and clean his office. I thought it smelled so funny for furniture polish, and as I wiped it the paper towels stuck the damn expensive desk. He came in and yelled. “What the hell are you doin?” I said. “Well, I’m polishing your desk.” He say. “With stain?” Oh god, you idiot. Jenay, you idiot. I just meant to dust the brother’s desk!

Another little girl cleaned the instruments. I used to give her a flouride treatment every single day! She liked the taste of it. I would play in her mouth, pretendin’ I was a dentist. When Dr. Barker went on lunch break I would go. “Come in Mindy...come sit in dis chair... open. now. open wide...’eere you go girl...ere....stick this in your mouth...Come on, Mindy...No. it ain’t gonna hurt, let me just let me drill ya.”

And she would go. “Uh. uh! Uh. uh!”

“It ain’t gonna hurt. Sugar. You want me to be a dentist, don’t you?”

“U-huh.”

“Well. let me just touch your teeth.”

“And. uh! Hurt! Hurt!”

Dr. Barker was the meanest son-of-a-bitch to everyone he ever met, to everybody
but to me! He treated the other dental assistants terrible but he was so nice to me. He took me in and made me his daughter. When Gloria Vanderbilt jeans first came out I wanted them pants so bad! My mother kept sayin’, “Those are 35 dollar pants. NayNay. We ain’t got no money for that!” I even faked tryin’ to put her name on. I took a marker on a pair a blue jeans! And, Lord, this dentist brought ‘em for me!

He brought me my first cashmere sweater. When I was in orchestra we had to wear long black skirts and white blouses. He had a woman come to the office to measure me and had mines made. He came to my very first concert when I was little. I waved to him from the stage and dropped my violin! It made a yung-yung-yung-yung noise and everybody laughed and I ran out. Of course, I knew he would come lookin’ for me! He did. and said. “That’s ok, get back in there.” I went back and played, smilin’ at him and wavin’.

I was crushedly in love with this man and he saw me as his little daughter. Damn, what a shame! One time when I was fifteen and had known him for five years, he called me kiddo, and I burst out cryin’. I told him. “I’m not a kid! I’m a woman!” Of course, he found that humorous and started laughin’, which made me cry even more. I ran out the door crying, and went home to my mama. By the time I got there, the phone rang and he apologized. “I’m sorry. I just keep forgetting that you are no longer a child.” Of course, now I’m feelin’ good cuz he recognized me as a woman!

My daddy couldn’t take off a day of work to come to my high school graduation but Dr. Barker closed down his office the whole day and spent it with me and my mama. I thought I was all-of-that becuz I was in his Mercedes Benz! We had a wonderful time. He also came to my graduation. He was the only white face in the crowd! The National Honor Society sat on the the stage so I could see him in the second balcony with all these flowers in his hands! I’m sittin’ there durin’ the ceremony wavin’ at him. My mother’s sittin’ there tellin’ me. “Stop that!” Afterwards he gave me a hug and I just slobbered all
over the man’s suit. I was tryin’ to say goodbye to my friends but den when he came over, forget the friends! He was my buddy. Yep. He was quite an influence!

Dr. Barker opened a door. He helped me see that there were so many beautiful things out there. He even offered to pay for me to go to dental school but my daddy wouldn’t let him.

My father was very quiet, except when he was drunk. Then he would talk about everything that pissed him off. One night he was drunk and he got on the phone and stammered. “Ah. we don’t need your god damn money.” My father was drunk as a skunk. cussin’ this doctor out for offerin’ to send me to one of the finest private colleges in Illinois. “We don’t need your god damn money.”

I had to go to work the next day and I apologized. He’s such a sweet...well, he wasn’t a sweet man. but he was sweet to me. He said. “It’s okay. Jenay.”

“He was drunk you know.”

“I understand.”

“Ok. Dr. Barker.

“Cheer up. kiddo.” He used to call me kiddo. “Cheer up. I understand.”

Male pride! Once my father said something it was the law. Even in his drunkness. I knew he meant that. But I actually thought. well. maybe this is his way of sayin’. “This is my daughter. I’m gonna be the father and I’m gonna pay for it.” So I didn’t question it. He talked the talk. I thought he had the money to walk the walk.

Other than Dr. Barker. I don’t recall anybody encouragin’ us to go to college. All my brothers and sisters finished high school because you couldn’t live in my mama’s house and not finish school. You could kill someone but you gotta finish high school! To me, high school graduation was just a stepping stone. I remember sayin’. “I got three more graduations to do. I wanted to earn a bachelors and masters and then PhD so that little high school wasn’t nothin’.”
One brother and one sister went to college but there wasn't that much fanfare for that. Yet I knew if I wanted to get out of that neighborhood I had to do better than high school. Everybody I saw that was makin' it was educated. They all had degrees and that's what I equated with success. I remember somebody tellin' me that a degree is somethin' nobody can take from you. Well, I had seen things taken a lot around there, so I knew I had to get a degree. I didn't want to be taken.

For the most part it wasn't a bad neighborhood. People would give the last dime they had. Nobody had nothin' but if I wanted it, at least half of it was mine! But there was also a lot of bad things about it. Oh, sometimes gang members would tell you to get into the house before they started shootin'. They very polite! In the summer, we be sittin' out on the porch.

"You all get your ass in the house, there gonna be some shootin'!"

"Yessir, Mr. Gang Member! Yessir! We go! Thank you, Mr. Gang Member, for at least warnin' us! Thank you, oh masser, masser, we goin' in the house now!"

When we was growin' up, it wasn't that bad. The gangs fought someplace else. Every Fourth of July the drug dealers and pimps threw a big block party. The bad people of the neighborhood gave back to the community! They had major fireworks, booths with homemade ice cream and food and free roast turkey and dunking tanks and free t-shirts and it was just one big party! We just closed our eyes and ate up all the food even though we knew it was from drug money. It was their way of saying thanks!

But there was alotta down-ness and I didn't wanna stay there. The further into my neighborhood you get, the yuckier and yuckier and yuckier it gets, and the people become like walkin' zombies. There's nothin' worse than a broken spirit. Life broke them. Too many punches from life. Some people just can't take it. You can look them in the eyes and see absolutely nothin'. No hope. No nothin'. And that's what I saw in my neighborhood. You look in their eyes and you see silence.
I will never be the same Jenay but the environment is still exactly the same today, almost twenty years later. Thank glory to God my spirit has never died!

So I guess it was an achievement to get out of there. Going to college was equal to a very good orgasm! Yeah, it was. Going to college and getting out of the neighborhood were the same thing. Leaving was an especially big deal for me because I had a very controlling mom so it was my chance to get away and to see what makes Jenay. I got away so I could experience who I was and learn different things but my sisters are still there with mama and can’t find themselves.

I went to my counselor at school. She got it all set up. My mom didn’t know how to do college stuff. I talked a classmate into going to this school and bein’ my roommate so I wouldn’t be alone.

When it actually happened my father was so excited! My first day at Illinois State my daddy was so excited he woke us up at 5:00 in the morning! “Come on you all, let’s get ready!” And he was just a smilin’ and tellin’ all his friends his daughter goin’ to college. The college was only three hours away and that was if you goin’ ten miles an hour. We were sleepy but he was just grinnin’ and, oh, he was so happy! And I thought that was so funny since it was never mentioned about college.

I purposely chose a predominantly white college, Illinois State. At the time I attended they had 22,000 people. 2,000-and-somethin’ of them was minorities. I had been around blacks all my life and needed to see what white people was like. I had heard so many stories about white people being drunkards and white women being whores so I was convinced this was gonna be a bunch of sex and rock and roll and devil worshipin’ and stuff like that. I swear. I wanted to see for myself. So when I went to college and found out that they wan’t, I was surprised! “Oh, they’re not like that!”

I also thought they was black-haters and wouldn’t be willing to know me, who I really am. And they wan’t! They embraced me with open arms and I embraced them. I
actually learned to love ‘em but that didn’t surprise me. I knew I was capable of lovin’
other folks.

The first day, we had a freshman dorm meeting and were asked to tell where we
were from. This one woman said, “I’m from Paris,” and I said, “Paris?” She said, “Paris.
Illinois!” I was the first black she had ever physically encountered! It just blew me away
and I said, “There’s no blacks? Not even a semi-mixed black? Hee hee.” That was eye-
opening for both of us! Though I had seen many white people, I had never really known a
white person. other than Dr. Barker. I discovered I was just her in a different way.

I found out that whites are just like I am. a wee different. They don’t like collard
greens but basically they want the same things. They want to succeed. they want their
children to succeed. they have hurts. they have fears.

I suffered financially while I was in college. I worked alotta hours there to help
pay for school. I would miss lunch and dinner ‘cuz I would go from class to work and
then I would go back to class and then back to work to try to get more hours, more
money. And if it wasn’t for my two roommates whose parents were well off and sent me
care gifts (they just thought I was the poorest thing in the world). I woulda starved. I
didn’t wanna keep askin’ my mother for money ‘cuz I knew she had given all there was.

And I knew that what she was givin’ wasn’t even hers. it was from my dead brother
insurance. So I tried not to ask her. especially for stuff that I could try to do without - like
food. So I ate alotta potato chips. Another student told me that eating potato chips and
cottage cheese. like a dip. would keep me full. I ate that and 39-cent Kraft macaroni and
cheese.

I suffered hard. Before college. I had enjoyed being a top student. I was invited to
skip the eighth grade. I was on the National Honor Society. I was eighth in a class of 160.
and my GPA was above 3.8. After bein’ praised so much in high school. I thought
college was going to be a breeze and that everybody would think I was as smart as
everyone had in high school and elementary school. Imagine the shock when I flunked my first test! I thought my test score must be wrong, but I flunked my second test and my third until the realization came. “Jenay, you gotta study. You ain’t smart here! Damn! There’s people here way smarter than you!”

The girl who was valedictorian of our high school class went to the University of Illinois to be a lawyer. She started drinkin’ cuz the same thing happened to her. Today she is not a lawyer. she is an alcoholic. If I actually liked drinkin’, I may have joined her. Her and the boy who was salutatorian of our high school class both dropped out of college at that time because it was just too much. In our own little neighborhood we had been praised for our gifts and this was like a slap in the face of pure ice water.

To me, nothing was worse than failing classes. My mother never saw my grades. I would get on a greyhound bus and stay a weekend when I knew grades was comin’ up. She never saw them ‘C’s or the ‘F’ in zoology. I was seriously studying at that point and could not grasp a damn thing about zoology.

I had the best roommate...she was black. She went to the same high school as me. I actually talked her into goin’ to this school so I wouldn’t be alone. Her sisters is all PhDs. highly intelligent. and I just thought that was so cool. it just fascinated the hell out of me! They was fancy black people! I used to lie about my sisters. “My sister’s the same thing.” I lied! It wasn’t that I wan’t proud of my sisters but they didn’t have degrees.

And then my sophomore year my best girlfriend came to Illinois State. Now you talk about brilliant! She went to the best private school in Chicago. I know she was a drug addict after college. I also know that she hooked. prostituted. for awhile to support her habit. What stopped her is that she got pregnant by one of her tricks and that’s whose dad Bethany is. She never earned her degree because she started smokin’ pot. What a waste! When I found out she was getting kinda wild. though she was still my friend. I kinda pushed back from her. She was doin’ stuff that I knew wan’t right. and it wan’t that I was
so goodie-goodie. I'm not into drugs.

To me, education is the most important thing there is, other than love of Christ and family. There's nothin' else. If you want money, get education. Christ and have your family. If you want to be happy, have education. Christ and your family. Everything leads back to them three things, especially education. I don't know if my friends who dropped out knew that. I don't know if they watched their mamas clean white people's toilets and saw the white people's degrees hangin' on their walls.

And then there's the fact that I just hate to be defeated at anything! Thank God I got my spirit from my daddy! My father, eighty years old, after two strokes and a heart attack, is still a playboy. He still gets up and thinks he's all-that! He ain' gonna be defeated and this girl ain't gonna admit defeat! Especially since my mother give me all my brother's dead money. I owed her that. I owed him that.

My junior year, over Christmas break. Mama said, "There's no more money. And I said, "Ok." I know my mama had spent all my brother's life insurance money, $16,000, on my education. And in 45 seconds, I wrote a check for the $3,000 I had saved from working since age eight.

When I came back from Illinois State I had changed. The moment my foot hit the pavement I knew it straight, that I didn't belong here. I was listenin' to all my friends who stayed there and they all talkin' about the same old s-h-i-t that they always been talkin' about, "Girl, my man this and my man that." and I'm listenin' to them and I just didn't care about all that anymore. And I'm tryin' to tell them about all the classes I been takin'. and, oh. God, what I had experienced. "I cut up dis and I cut up dat and dis one class said that dis and dis and I was usin' my PSYCH101 to analyze them and they didn't really care. They were still hung up on. "My man this and girl, you gotta get your nails done." I wasn't the same Jenay that went to college. I was a different Jenay, a wiser Jenay. A Jenay that knew that them visions of me in Paris and me here and me there
could happen.

I told my mother, “Mom, I feel just like a stranger here.

“What do you mean, NayNay?

“I just feel like I don’t belong here anymore.” And I remember that night, cryin’
cuz I had lost somethin’ that I knew I could never get back. To this day, I feel out of
place there. I feel that I’m gonna keep going and they just gonna stay at one level.
They’re happy with that. I’m just leavin’ them behind.

_I had to get out of that neighborhood!

Mama went to do some housecleaning and my father was at work. I was alone,
praying to the Lord. I was really down. I didn’t wanna stay there. It was alotta downness
and people doin’ same things. I asked God, “What can I do here?” I could work, I could
get in a buncha hours and save up money for another semester but everybody else will be
gone. I could go durin’ the summer. I set there and I was ‘ryin’ to figure out how I could
come up with that money. I thought a thousand things that I could do and one of ‘em was
ask Dr. Barker. He would give it to me. And you know what kept me from doin it? Pride.
I picked up the phone so many times. I actually dialed it once but I thought about that
night my father cussed him out, drunk. I hung up. I said, “Lord, I guess I’m not gonna be
a doctor.” I said, “Well, I can sit here and do nothin’ or I could try to do somethin’.”

I was crying and prayin’ to God about what to do and I heard this commercial
singing, “Be all that you can be.” I looked up and asked, “Lord, are you tryin’ to tell me
something?” And, this is the honest-to-God truth! My mother had read the paper that
morning and she had left it open to a big old print advertisement about joining the army.
I said, “Oh. Lord! You did tell me to call!” So I called the recruiter! When mother came
in I was all excited! I said, “Ma! Guess what I did?” And she said, “What, NayNay?” I
said, “I’ve joined the military!” And she started laughin’ and saying, “NayNay, you so
silly.” I said, “No, I really did! The guy is comin’ this evening at 5:00.” And she said,
“Yeah, Jenay, you so silly.” And she just kept on doin’ what she was doin’.

Close to 5:00 this guy come walkin’ up the driveway and I said, “See, I told you!” She peeked out and saw this big white guy with this uniform on. We let him in and my mother was ver’ rude to him. “She didn’t know what she doin’! She just my little baby.”

“Yes, I do know what I’m doing.” He talked to me about the Montgomery bill and the rest is history. The next day I had the physicals and took the tests and they told me I could be a medic. A couple days later I swore in, my mother and sister in the background, mad as bulldogs. And a couple weeks later I got orders to go and they were still shocked.

I told my friends I wasn’t comin’ back to college. Gail actually came into my neighborhood to spend a day and we went shoppin’. She brought a whole bunch of stuff and I’m just watchin’ because I had to save my money ‘til maybe one day I could go back to school. She was just shoppin’ up a storm with her mother’s charge card. I said, “Your mother gonna kill you.”

“No she ain’t. Here, you want this purse, Jenay? I’ll buy it for ya.” Her family was loaded and she just thought my needing to quit was the most horrible thing. “Oh, Jenay, maybe my dad could help you with some money.”

“My father ain’t gonna take Doctor Barker’s. you know he ain’t gonna take your dad’s.”

She just felt so sorry for me. She cried and she cried. She said, “Is there any way, Jenay?”

“No. I’ll just try to save my money and go next year.”

We cried. She was my good friend. I say, “I love you and I will always love you and your family, too. They have been so nice to me.” I watched her get in her little sports car. (laugh) She was waving goodbye and I say, “Well, I won’t see her again.”

This was when I began to resent my father for declining Dr. Barker’s offer to send me to college. I resented my cousin Stacie, too. She said she was living with her brother
so she got that financial aid. They took one look at my father’s income and, though there was all of us, they turned us down. And he was talkin’ about paying for it all and he had nothin’ to back it up.

I asked my mother, “Stacie lied. Why we can’t lie?”

Mama said, “NayNay, I never had to lie about nothin’ and we ain’t gonna start now.”

“But I wanna go back to school. I wanna be a doctor, Mama.”

“We can’t lie, Nay Nay.”

Stacie went on to school and got her degree way before I did. To this day, big time, her husband’s a police officer and they drive a Lexus and make big money. I said, “See, you always say lyin’ never counts. She’s doin’ good.”

So I had to go to the military. I was very scared. I didn’t wanna go to no military! I knew the horror stories. I wasn’t very athletic but once I had decided to do it I started running in the park, tryin’ to build endurance.

I felt that my father had made that bed so I gotta be big enough to face the consequences about it. Yeah, that took a long time to forgive my father for. And I really have forgiven him. I ain’t forgot but I have forgiven him. I can’t go all my life on “what if”. He didn’t say nothin’ when I joined the army but when I got ready to leave he told me to take care. He knew that it was somethin’ I had to do.

My aunt told me, “Oh, you can’t make it in the army. You start cryin’ if anybody cuss at you!” She was right, but her attitude kept me goin’. The more I ran, the more they screamed, the more I thought, “I’m gonna show her that old NayNay ain’t as soft as everyone thinks she is.” There’s a toughness to me.

Oh, girl! They dogged us in basic training! I guess I didn’t feel bad because the army is an equal opportunity dogger! While you eatin’, somebody screamin’ in your face. “Hurry up! Eat that food! Come on, move that spoon!” I’d grab a bagel or somethin’
quick cuz they wouldn’t give me peace to eat. We would run four to six miles a day. I
had blisters all over my feet but I was going to stay. Oh! I was buff. They had ran me and
I had muscles everywhere. I was bad! I came in weighing 138 pounds and left basic
training about 110. I was glad to graduate from basic. That was too, too tough.

I’m a lot like my mother in that she is very much the center of attention. Her and
the drill sergeant got into it because she felt that she had flown down for graduation, she
should have time with me. I’m in the military now and my drill sergeant is nice enough to
give me time with my mother. But when he said. “Soldier, it’s time to go.” My mama
said. “But I’m not finished talkin’ to her.”

“Mom. I gotta go!”

“Don’t you see your mother talkin’ to you! I’m talkin to you! Sh-h. you wait there
Sarg. she’s talkin to me.”

“Mama. I’m in the army now.”

“Don’t leave! Don’t Leave!” My mother’s screaming at me.

The sergeant’s screaming at me. “Didn’t I tell you to move your ass? Move your
ass!”

“Wait God damn it!” My mother’s tellin this sargeant. “Nobody’s cussin my
blackass daughter but me. Your ass aint black. No! you won’t be cussin’ at my...”

This drill sergeant was Hispanic. He’s lookin’ at my mother.

“Did you have any black-ass kids?”

“Mama. won’t you please stop. he’s gonna dog me later.”

He’s cussin me. “Move your ass. soldier. move your ass!”

My mother, she’s pullin on me and I’m tryin’ to leave.

“She’s in my army now!”

“But she’s my god damn black-ass daughter!”

I’m thinking. “I’m going to hell and the drill sergeant’s going to take me there! I
said. “Oh. Lord!” Her and this drill sergeant, girl, they frosty!

Finally, the drill sergeant let my mother call cadence to our graduation march. Everybody thought my mother was so cool. She asked the drill sergeant cuz he was singin’ cadence. “Ooh, I like that! Let me do it!”

He had had so much of my mother. He laughed and said. “Go ahead.”

So we’re marchin’ to the graduation site and my mother is callin’ the cadence. “Left-right-left. your mama was there but you gone. your mother was there but you gone. your beautiful mama, your beautiful mama…”

Only my mother would outwhip the drill sergeant! “Left-right-left. I can’t hear you…” He was so glad when she left! But she enjoyed herself. My father was very quiet. He just set back and grinned. He was extremely excited but he couldn’t really tell me cuz my mother was too busy outshining him!

My first duty station was El Paso. She didn’t like that, but my second duty station was Germany. “Well. you can’t go to Germany!”

“I’m goin’ to Germany. Ma.”

“No. you not! Oh. no. you can’t go! What do they think? Germany?”

When I met the sergeant in Germany. I had had a tiring day. dragging this suitcase that she overpacked through airports, onto the airplane. and up to the post.

“Specialist Aiken?”

“Yes. Sergeant.

“You’re Specialist Aiken?”

“Yessssir.”

“Your mother has been callin’. Let me go get the general.”

My mother called the general of the post! The general of the post! In Germany! She told them she didn’t want her daughter goin’ to Germany and asked him to please send her back. In the back the sargeants were laughin’. The general came out and sneered.
“Your mommy called, Specialist Aiken. She called several times. I spoke to her. She don’t want you to be here.” He pouted. “Your mommy don’t want you to be here. Shame.”

“Did she really call, Sir?” I asked but I knew she did it. I knew that was just my mother. If she didn’t like something, she was going to tell you about it. Nobody else but my mother would call the General. That took me awhile to live down.

Peter and I had met in San Antonio and when I went to Germany, I got put in his company again. That’s when we really started dating. We got married there when I was six months pregnant. I was discharged first and moved here before Peter did. I had met his parents a few times and they were supportive. I lived with them a month then moved into the little apartments right across the street from them. Just me and my boys and my little Chevette.

There was an advertisement in the paper that St. Mary’s was having an open house. We were medics in the military. Peter had never even spoke about bein’ a nurse but I had played with the idea. “I don’t have the money to be a doctor, maybe I can be a nurse.”

My father-in-law took me to the open house and I signed up for the nursing program. When Peter was discharged, he decided to sign up for it, too. We both started off together in nursin’ school. He had $17,500 from the Montgomery Bill and I had $21,000. I had put more in.

The monthly checks were barely enough to live off of. We both worked part time but he actually dropped out a semester to work full time cuz we were starvin’! One year I think we lived on $8,000 but the Lord was always with us. I remember one day the car was on ‘E’ and we had no money. I said. “Well, Peter, we just have to go. We gotta go to school.”

“But the car is on empty.”
“It’s gonna start. I know it.” So all the way there, I’m prayin’ and Peter’s cussin’ at every red light. It took us all the way and when we got there a classmate said, “Oh, Jenay. I forgot that you had lent me five dollars.” I know we didn’t lend this woman money cuz we certainly didn’t have no money to lend! I said, “See, the Lord is with us! He is just with us! You know he is with us!”

Many times we wanted to eat lunch but we didn’t have the money to go to the cafeteria! God, we’d be so hungry! But we’d just go in to class and our stomachs would be makin’ more noise than the instructor! We’d be tryin’ to cough so folks couldn’t hear it rattlin’!

I was a horrible student. I was just ok, average, nothin’ spectacular. Like I told my teachers. I’d be there with the last cockaroaches. I ain’t givin’ up. Me and the cockaroaches will be takin’ classes! When I was in nursin’ school I saw myself graduate. I really did. I saw it. I saw myself in that pointed claus hat and I knew I could be an excellent nurse!

I didn’t have the booksmart that, say, Susan Belden, had. That was one smart girl. She had a degree in Chemistry. She worked with just about all the blacks and a buncha whites. She was white. Susan, and sweet as she can be. She helped us with understandin’ stuff. We had everybody over to our house and we had books, chips, and junk or we go over to Susan’s house or somewhere. She was a student. She was brilliant. She really was brilliant and she wasn’t stuck-up about it! I could study twelve hours and get a ‘C’ and she barely looked at the notes and got a ‘A plus’. And it just didn’t rise her, “Oh, I got a ‘A’.” When I got a ‘B’, girl, I told people, “I got a ‘B’! A ‘B’! It’s 83 but it’s a ‘B’!”

I gotta tell you somethin’ funny. Of course I didn’t have a typewriter and all those fancy things but the school had a computer. About a month before graduation I was workin’ in the computer room and I saw this girl. I said, “What are you doin’?” She said, “I’m correctin’ my spellin’.” I said, “It can do that? I coulda got a good grade on some of
these papers!"

But we made it! That graduation was one of the proudest days of my life! I was 31 and I was so happy! It was just me and my husband and a couple of my friends came. I was so excited that I didn’t even care that our parents couldn’t come. I was so happy! My mother looked at my pictures and said, “Jenay, why do you have that clansman hat on?” I was a grinnin’, smilin’ fool.

I won the Student of the Year Award! I was class president so I had to present a retiring faculty member with an award right after they had given me my award. I couldn’t talk. I was slobberin’. My nose was runnin’. Nobody in the whole damn church had tissue. I’m usin’ my white dress as a napkin! So I just told the instructor to take the damn thing! People were laughin’ and pattin’ me on the back. That was really wonderful!

Every time I pass the cathedral I think about how proud I was becuz St. Mary’s classes are very hard! Hey, girl. I had hair when I started at St. Mary’s! I really did have hair! After three years I was bald as an eagle cuz I sat there saying, “I don’t get this” and pulling out every strand!

It was worth it! That first year after we graduated we made $60,000! We was in H&R Block and the tax accountant said we had made sixty thousand dollars on the nose. We looked at each other! That’s the most money! I know this seems stupid but my goal was always to make more than my daddy did and that first year we did! I was Mrs. Trump in the flesh! You talk about movin’ on up with the Jeffersons! I was Weezie and he was George Jefferson! We thought we was bad! We have never made that much since, cuz I’m not workin’. but that was awesome. I am not a braggin’ woman but girl, I was tellin’ everyone that we made $60,000! I would say, modestly, “All we made was sixty this year.” and wait for a response. We didn’t have a lick of furniture in our duplex. but we was the Jeffersons!

That was when I started getting sick. We found out I only had one kidney and it
was tired! Mama called the coroner’s office in Chicago. She really did and she was very excited about it. “NayNay, guess what mama did?”

I said. “What, Mama?”

“Well. Jenay, you know how these young black gang members are dyin’ left and right. I called the coroner’s office and told them my daughter needs a kidney.

I said. “You did what? Well, what did the guy say.”

She was waving her hands. “He took your name and he said the first chance they get they gonna give you one.

I said. “Ma, they can’t take a kidney and jump-start it like it’s a ’57 Chevy.

“Oh, you gonna get your kidney. NayNay. They said so.”

I said. “Mama, they just took your name to be nice.”

“Well. Jenay. these young black mans are dead. They don’t need they kidney. My daughter need a kidney.”

“Ma, first of all, they have to match. And if they dead that long you can’t just start it up!”

But she was convinced. But she did call the coroner and somewhere in Chicago my name is on a list waitin’ for a kidney.

I was havin’ a really rough time with dialysis. I needed to be fed when I went to church. I needed to feel like I got somethin’ out of it. We were attending Faith but it was a dead church and I think every dead thing outta be buried. And I told the pastor dat. He asked why we stopped comin’. I said. “Every dead thing needs to be buried.”

We loved Evangelical Church except for one thing. Now this may sound like a prejudiced statement but part of the black culture is our church, the way we interact, the way we praise God. Although Evangelical have everything we want, it’s predominantly white, and I want my kids to know the black culture in regards to the church ‘cuz I think it’s unique. It’s part of who I am, and I know that sounds silly but, until I can find a
church, and I’m comparin’ churches as like the church I grew up in Chicago. Most of the black churches are, worshiping-wise, similar. But it’s not a black church and I want them to experience a black church and the black culture of goin’ to church. It’s unique in itself.

I tell that to people and they look at me kinda like I’m crazy. You can’t understand it if you haven’t been a part of it. Evangelical worshippers are similar, but they’re not black. And that’s the difference. I want them to experience a black church. Truly. The speakin’ in tongue. The holiness of it. The oil. The layin’ of the hands. the passin’ out. the music. the drums. the good. the choir. the un!un!un! I want them to experience all of it because in its own little container, that’s the essence of being black. To me.

So I’m in limbo.

I visit Oak Street Baptist Church a lot. I’m gonna tell you the reason why I don’t join Oak Street. I know too many folks! And they don’t, from what I saw, have a great kid’s program. After Faith, Jeremy and Randy was thinkin’ that church was a place that they could do crafts. They were separate the kids and go downstairs to watch movies or cut-out stuff. They wasn’t gettin fed. I think children need to be fed. You know. I was drivin’ Jeremy to school the other day and we sittin’ there listening to gospel tapes and I’m talkin’ to him. Kids need to be fed. They need to know that God exists. not to be cuttin’ up no animals. They need to know even at their little age that God is there for them.

Missionar’ is too snooty for me. When I first went there, I was actually open-minded cuz I knew Peter had went there and taught Sunday school before he joined the military. So I was really open about it but this woman told me, “Sister.” little old lady, she’s still alive, too. “You need to come to this church cuz we can give your children some scholarships.” I said, “I don’t go to church for no scholarships!” Just like the Lord has helped me get various scholarships, he’ll do the same thing for my children. so I
don’t havta choose a church based on scholarships. I choose a church that’s gonna help me grow in Christ and that’s gonna help me magnify his glory.

I’m comparin’ churches as like the church I grew up in Chicago. When we visit my mother we go to the church I grew up in. I loved that church! I loved that church. When I went there after my transplant, they stood me up. “Sister Jenay, we so glad you doin’ good.” and they took a collection for me. I loved my church! I grew up in that church. And when I come home and they just be huggin’ me and kissin’ me and. “Oh, fatso. look at you!”

That’s my family! *That’s* the connection! *That’s* what unites black people to me! When I think of who I am as a black woman, a great part of it is my relationship with the church. the *encounters* with my church. And I think that spiritual joining goes way back to slavery time. I can imagine when slavery began, everybody with different languages from various parts of African, what they had in common was that shared music. I’m sure we didn’t have Christ back then cuz we had our different gods, but when Christianity was introduced to us we embraced it. We embraced it wholeheartedly. To this day, that still is our way of uniting and fellowshipping with each other. That’s it! Remember, I said I couldn’t pinpoint it. but that’s it!

Right now I am getting fed. I’m not in a church but I’m still worshipin’ God and I’m givin’ him the praise for everything.

We *do* church! We *do* it! We inhale it! You just partake of it. You inhale it. It just engulps you. It is the feelin’ of the sense, the presence of God, and it’s the sense of comraderie. You just engulp it! We *do* church. We do. Do it at home! Girl, I have had some shoutin’ good times. About a month ago. I’m talkin’ to my sister. we had a shoutin’ good halleluiah. tear up the living room time. me and her. on the phone. Cryin’. speakin’ in tongue. praisin’ God right on the phone.

No, presence of God ain’t just in that church! Presence of God is in, you know. I
think we all possess God. I think that His spirit is in every one of us since we are all his creation. It's in all of us. It's just how far are you willin' to let him out. It says in the Bible that he'll come into you and sup with you and you with him. And he's right at the door. That's what it says. He's right there. He wants you to step right in that door and just commune with him. Everybody have that. Everybody can get that. That's the wonderful thing about God. It's not just for the pretty or the skinny, it's for anybody who is willing to accept that. Now you just can't get no better than that!

And I can do church all by myself! Ain't you ever just set and talked to God and get to thankin' him for everything He's done for you? And just get crazy? I have many a time!

I'm still feelin' his presence but I'm worried about my kids. If they die tomorrow they need to know that God will be there to carry them home. I wish that we was more of a prayin' family. I really do. I really do. I wish I could pray with my children and Peter as a family. But we so busy doin' this and runnin' there that it ain't gonna happen.

At church I met Leannah. She just kept sayin. "The Lord said to me to give you one of my kidneys." I said. "Okay. Okay. You a big ol' German woman and I'm black. I don't think you would match." She was so persistent I finally gave her the doctor's name and next thing I know she called and said. "Jenay. we match as if we were sisters!" It's Halloween and I'm sittin' there tryin' to pass out candy. I'm cryin'. kids lookin' at me like I'm crazy. This little boy, I just poured all the candy in his bag and I cut off the porch and we had church! We sat and hollered and cried and just acted-a-fool! And even though we found out she had hepatitis, it was still a wonderful blessing. And later I got a kidney.

Why did God put me on dialysis and give me nine years of kidney disease? A lesson. And I learned it. I learned a very important lesson, didn't I? Life is so wonderful and I'm gonna live it, too! God every once in awhile, like I said, allows us to have these whoopin's happen to us so we can go. "Hmmm". And I went. "Hmmm." Especially when
I was on dialysis I said, “Hmmm,” alotta times! “Hmmm. whatcha doin’. Lord?” And I think my lesson was to appreciate life. Now I don’t take life for granted. I don’t take my family for granted. I look at the trees different. I look at the sunshine different. I look at everything different.

On Prejudice

I didn’t experience none of this prejudice stuff. Not at Illinois State. Not at all. Nope. I never experienced it in the military either. Not at St. Mary’s. other than my advisor. Witchy Poo. That demon. In all honesty I just think she was a cold-blooded bitch. excuse my English. Her attitude could be based on her past experience, though. Blacks in general didn’t do that well in nursin’ so that was just a learned behavior for her. The sad thing was. when we started nursin’ school the first black to go through St. Mary’s was retiring. No blacks had attended St. Mary’s in 30 years. When it did hit me at St. Mary’s it shocked the hell outta me but I knew how to nip that in the butt. Some things you can control. I could control me bein’ around her so I just asked another instructor to be my advisor and I didn’t have to be bothered with that.

But see. I wasn’t lookin’ for racism, especially in nursin’ school. I was so focused on passin’ class. I saw myself in that pointed clans hat and I knew I could be a excellent nurse!

Because we the only blacks on this street. I do feel our grass should look better, our decks should be better. everything should be better ‘cuz everybody gonna be watchin’ me. I know that’s stupid. My husband has no feelin’s like that cuz he have been around whites all his life. So he think I’m totally crazy when I fuss. “Oh we gotta get dis done. we gotta get dis done,” but I don’t want people sayin’. “Oh. down go the neighborhood; here come a black.” That’s my own stereotype and it took awhile for me to really feel comfortable here.

In fact. when the kids’ friends would come and congregate over here and play
football and stuff on my grass, I would go, “Get off my grass! You go to your house! You play in your yard! Don’t play in my yard! My grass have to be bright!”

I’m startin’ to feel more comfortable here cuz we got fantastic neighbors. I swear we got wonderful neighbors! Everybody have been sweet except for one family. They look at us with hatred in their eyes. I caught the father one day. His back door is directly by my garage. I was getting’ in the car. I’m not a paranoid person but I caught him lookin’ at me with hatred, just starin’ at me like I was dirt. But I can deal with that little piece of crap.

I was told a black doctor would have to be a hundred time more better than a white doctor. Or to succeed, you havta be a hundred time better than that white counterpart. So I take that with my everyday life. I gotta be a hundred time better. My house gotta be a hundred time better. That’s alotta shit to carr’. ‘scuze my French. It is! But that’s what we’re taught as black people: You gonna be overlooked so you gotta be that much better.

Mrs. Van tried to hip Jeremy just not long ago. “Jeremy, you know your friend, Eric? If there was a job for him and both of you equally qualify, and you may have even a little bit more, they are gonna pick Eric.” At age 13, my son has no concept of that. It scares me that he doesn’t understand yet I don’t want my kids carryin’ that weight. When she told him that I was kinda mad but then I got to thinkin’ that it’s the truth. It’s not always the case but it’s likely to happen.

My mother used to tell us a story of when she was little. They had started to let blacks vote and her grandfather was so happy. He got up so early so he can go cast his vote. Her grandfather really tall, distinguished black man. and one that she thought never would back down to anybody. He took her. He was so excited ‘cuz he was goin’ to vote. And they got there and one of the white mans told him. “Boy, what are you doin’ here?” And my mother said she remember lookin’ at her grandpa and her grandpa was just kinda
backin’ down and that was a surprise. “You ain’t doin no votin’ here. I don’t care what somebody tell ya.” And she said she remember her grandfather face as he grabbed her hand and said. “Come on girl. let’s go.” He never did get to vote.

My brother said. “Oh. I woulda went on and voted!” But I told him. “No. you wouldn’t. you woulda been just like grandpa, great-grandpa, and stepped back.” Cuz that’s the way it was done. “If you wanted to live and your family to live you woulda backed. I don’t care how proud you are. You woulda backed up.”

“Oh. no. I woulda. I woulda started fightin!”

“No. you wouldn’t. Let’s face reality, that’s the way it was.” We can give so much praise and thanks that our father in heaven has changed that. Now has he changed it alot? Maybe there’s a lesson somewhere that we, as a Black race, need to do more. I love when my mama used to tell me stories like that cuz it just only made me praise the Lord more. Thank God I wasn’t in that era.

My Jeremy is real stuck up and that’s somethin’ I cannot tolerate. I stay on his butt. He corrects my English. I have very bad. I call it ghetto, English, but I’m from the ghetto. I say, “hot salt” instead of “hot sauce” and he corrects me. When he criticized my sister kids and the way they talk, I went ballistic. I had to bring the brother home! “Let’s not forget that you would be talkin’ the same way if it weren’t for the glory of the Lord. Never. ever. as long as you stay black, and that’s a long, long time, never talk down or make nobody feel bad because they speak a certain way. Jeremy, I just cannot tolerate that! You gonna encounter people that speak way better dan you and you gonna meet people dat speak worse den you. But you don’t judge nobody like dat. By the grace of God. you coulda been in that war zone Chicago. You coulda been duckin’ bullets. You coulda been sayin ‘hot salt’ instead of. ‘Mommy. the word is hot sauce.’ Honey. you need to just thank the Lord for where you are. You don’t have to share a book in your class. your books aren’t twenty years old. You got good books and that’s part a God’s
grace. That’s the grace that God has given us so you need to come off your high horse and instead of makin’ fun a your cousins, you need to embrace ‘em and show ‘em this part of life.”

I don’t know if I reached him but he know how I feel about it. If I ever hear him again, it’s gonna be the longest talk again!

When I first got into the Van family, Mr. Van would correct my English. He’s very highly educated and got all these degrees. He has a pharmacy degree, a nutrition degree and he was some type of chef. And he would go, “No, you mean isn’t instead of ain’t.” And it would piss me off! For awhile I swallowed it, but I did eventually said, “Well let me tell you somethin’! You are not my English teacher! Now, I don’t mind you correctin’ Jeremy because I don’t want him to pick up my bad habits but that’s who I am. I say hot salt instead of hot sauce.”

I have my ‘white people voice’ but den when I’m in the ‘hood with the girls, when I just let loose. I say hot salt.

And y’see. religion just is foremost in life. I knew that my Father wouldn’t just give a white person everything and not give me everything. My Father said he would give all of us the desires of the heart, and I’m included in ‘all’. He ain’t gonna just say, “Oh, all you white folks. I’m gonna give you all Cadillacs and pretty, big houses and you poor black folks over there. I’m gonna give you shit.”

I serve a just God, a Father who say I’m his daughter. I know my Father don’t want nothin’ but the very best for me. Don’t your earthly father want the best for you? So my Godly Father must want that and more for me. That’s how I sit and think about it.

Ain’t that awesome when you think about that? Shoot. This old house ain’t nothin’. Just wait til you see my mansion. I’m gonna be sittin’ there like ZaZa with my fuzzy wuzzies on. And I’ll say, “Come on in, dahling. Have some caviah.” And my mother gonna be in her fur and my father have his stroke therapy, cussin’ the therapist.
And my kids’ll have all the money to go to school. ‘Cuz they gotta go to school. If they
don’t do nothin else they have got to go to school ‘cuz I think I would whup their ass
even if they forty and hadn’t finished school.

*On Black Women*

That is so true, that every black woman I have ever known, ever, have been strong
and opinionated. And if that’s stereotypin’, well, that’s just the truth. Most black women I
have met are very dominating, includin’ myself. I’m gonna tell you why my mom is cuz I
asked her once. She said, “NayNay, cuz I have to be. You know your daddy drank and
partied. There was things to be done and I had to do them or they wouldn’t be done.”

I said, “OK. I understand that. That makes sense to me”. My father was an
excellent father, but he wasn’t a good husband. He drank and he danced and he boozed
and he womanized, but that’s just him. That’s why mama had to be the dominating force.

Now, why am I like that? Mine is just learned behavior. My husband does what I
consider to be husbandly things. He take care of the garbage and pay half the bills and
he’s there. So why am I dominating? It’s a learned thing.

My brother-in-law only dates white women. He had a black woman once and she
was too much for him! He said he couldn’t handle it! Well, we fuss! Black women are
very naggy. I know I am. We can be very naggy about anything! You breathe. I don’t like
the way you breathe! We are very naggy by nature! That’s the honest-God truth! We are
naggin’ women and some men just can’t take that. We’re very critical of everything
somebody do.

My mother is fussy, too. She’s the queen! I’m just one of the subjects. If you met
my aunt you would wanna shoot her in one meetin’. She fusses on her husband so much
the man had to go to a prostitute for peace.

That concept that black women are vocal, that is really a true statement. We do
haveta be that way. It wasn’t because that’s our personality, the sad part was, we had to
be. Most black women had to be vocal either through situations where the husband or boyfriend had left or there was never one around to begin wid. And then I actually think it's still back from slavery time when they took the men and the women had to kinda keep the clan and the family together. I think it's the effect of generations. How things are instilled in us. How that has an effect on present day.

I don't care what my son married. He could come in here with a polka dot woman if he happy. Life is too short. You got to be happy. I'm sure my son would probably marry a white woman and it can't even bother me one bit. If she know how to cook greens, she fine. If she don't know how to cook greens, I'll teach her.

That's why I say I'm constantly changin'. That's what we're supposed to do in life – constantly change and grow.

**Themes and Findings**

The participant-narrator has answered the first research question by presenting her story. True to the interpretive form, the process of telling her story enabled her not only to recollect and renew her identity, but also to make meaning of life events (Denzin, 1989; Glesne, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Her story can now be analyzed in order to answer the second research question: How do elements (family and individual characteristics, life events, interactions, personal meanings) of this life story relate to factors that have been identified by existing research findings as related to student development, especially African American persistence in higher education?

The literature review in Chapter Two began with a general overview of student development theory and then focused on theories specific to African American students and women. Theories were selected for inclusion using two criteria: 1) they had the potential to provide insights into the success of an African American, female college student; and 2) they are frequently cited in educational literature. Because there continues to be a lack of empirical studies on some of the most basic developmental
issues facing college students in multicultural contexts (Antonio, 1999), the second criterion was not always met. The initial literature review was intended to ground analysis in a strong base of relevant theme topics and as recurring themes emerged, the literature base was re-consulted.

Implicit in the initial literature review was the assumption that being African American and being a woman were the participant-narrator’s weaknesses as a college student. The inductive process of narrative inquiry led to a closer look at theories that described an Afrocentric women’s culture and the ensuing analysis indicated that being black and being a woman were not her weaknesses, they were her strengths.

*Mothers of Black Culture*

Oblivious to this unconscious bias, I thought I was open-mindedly rejecting the stereotype that black women are strong. As the theme of strength emerged early and recurred frequently, always in the context of women, it was used to focus our third interview. Since the method chosen for this study allowed us to be collaborators, I shared Vaz’s (1998) chapter with the participant-narrator. After reading this statement: “Black women have an ability not only to survive conditions of great adversity but also to actually find strength and courage to succeed despite the adversity” (p. 156), the participant-narrator said, “That is so true, that every black woman I have ever known, ever, have been strong and opinionated” (see p. 85). This insight was checked with the debriefing focus group members, three African American woman professionals, and they each affirmed the pertinence of black feminine strength in their lives as well. Black women writers concurred (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1989; Scott, 1991).

Constant references to the participant narrator’s mother indicated that this was the most influential relationship in her life. In reference to her mother, the definition of strength seemed to include domination and control. The participant-narrator’s acceptance of this controlling relationship is evident in several childhood stories and affirmed
explicitly. "My mom wanted me to do alotta things...I was the only one of her children that humored her" (see p. 59). Field journal notes indicate that her mother corroborated this by saying. "Jenay was always the good chile. Always. The only one that wanted to go to church and do things with me. And the smartest one! We were good buddies."

Although at times her explicit remarks are critical of her mother’s control, her implicit message is one of deep admiration. The participant narrator often referred to her mother’s manner of communicating as nagging or fussiness. and refers to her mother as the Queen of Fussiness yet seems to take pride in owning this quality herself (see p. 86). Her admiration for this characteristic is revealed when, after providing an extreme example in her mother’s tangle with the drill sergeant she applied the positive descriptor “outshinin’ him” to the aggressive behavior (see pp. 72-73). Focus group participants enthusiastically identified with passages describing the mother’s outspokenness. and spoke with approbation of the same quality in their own mothers. In a chapter entitled You Haven’t Seen Anything Until You Make a Black Woman Mad, Hambrick (1997) used the word “bulldogeristic” (p. 80) to describe this quality. Hooks (1989) conveyed the same appreciation and identified it as contagious: “And yet it was hard not to speak in warm rooms where heated discussions began at the crack of dawn. women’s voices filling the air. giving orders. making threats. fussing” (p. 5).

The participant-narrator and focus group members fondly related stories of strong. opinionated. outspoken. controlling mothers who held their children to high expectations. Etter-Lewis’ (1993) study of successful. African American. professional women indicate that their mothers were “doers” (p. 88) who took active roles in their communities. worked outside the home. and still managed to provide a nurturing and supportive environment for their families.

Focus group participants further agreed with the narrator’s reasoning that black women are strong and directive because the men were often missing, and quotes her
mother for attributing her strength and domination to her father's frequent absence (see p. 85). The noticeable absence of men in the participant-narrator's childhood is apparent in many statements, most poignantly when she said, "I don't know if it was unusual for my father to be unable to read cuz there were very few men in our neighborhood" (see p. 51). Focus group members affirmed fathers' absences to jobs and weekend outings and agreed that they each also felt fortunate to have grown up with a father in the home. As the narrator states, "I think it's still back from slavery time when they took the men and the women had to kinda keep the clan and the family together. I think it's the effect of generations" (see pp. 85-86). Hooks (1989) recalled, "the men were often silent, often absent" (p. 5), and Collins (1990) discussed the development of black women according to the historical absence of men.

Although the narrator and focus group participants attributed their fathers' absences primarily to jobs, they simultaneously spoke of the constant, life-giving attention and nurturance they felt from mothers who also worked long hours outside the home. The literature documents this incredible achievement of black women (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1990).

Their lives were not easy. Their lives were hard. They were black women who for the most part worked outside the home serving white folks, cleaning their houses, washing their clothes, tending their children – black women who worked in the fields or in the streets, whatever they could do to make ends meet, whatever was necessary. Then they returned to their homes to make life happen there. (hooks, p. 41-42)

As the participant-narrator's story, with its many references to significant women, demonstrated, the absence of men also forced women to find strength in the affirmation of other women (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1990). Hooks (1990) described the black woman's role as primary, if not sole, nurturers of personal and social development for the entire community of primarily women and children:
In our young minds houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place – the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned dignity, integrity of being; there we learned to have faith. The folks who made this life possible, who were our primary guides and teachers, were black women. (p. 41-42)

The narrator’s response to hooks’ passage was, “Hm. That’s interesting. My mama used to do that. My mama still does that (transcript. p. 109).” Additionally, the narrator’s story frequently cites instances of aunts, sisters, and church women acting almost as another mother, and this observation was affirmed by Collins (1990).

As mothers, othermothers, teachers, and sisters, Black women...fashioned an independent standpoint about the meaning of black womanhood. These self-definitions enabled Black women to use African-derived conceptions of self and community to resist negative evaluations of Black womanhood advanced by dominant groups. (p. 10)

With this statement, Collins credited black women’s grounding in traditional African American culture with fostering their own distinctive Afrocentric women’s culture from which they nurtured each other and drew strength. Part of their self-definition was a responsibility to transmit this cultural perception to their families. Thus, it was black women who facilitated the retention and transformation of this Afrocentric worldview (Collins, 1990). As mothers of black culture, they took on responsibility for the world (Scott, 1991).

This worldview offers an explanation for the importance of extended families and communities to the narrator, who explicitly stated that her family included her black church. The process of bracketing the interview transcripts identified three themes that were difficult to code because they seemed inexorably linked: family, church, and culture. Through the church, the narrator’s family tree seemed not to be a gradually widening strain, but rather a very full, living bush that burgeoned around her to include all African Americans and African ancestors.
I'm comparin' churches as like the church I grew up in Chicago. I loved that church...That's my family! That's the connection! That's what unites black people to me! When I think of who I am as a black woman, a great part of it is my relationship with the church, the encounters with my church. And I think that spiritual joining goes way back to slavery time. I can imagine when slavery began, everybody with different languages from various parts of African, what they had in common was that shared music. I'm sure we didn't have Christ back then cuz we had our different Gods, but when Christianity was introduced to us we embraced it together! We embraced it wholeheartedly! To this day, that still is our way of uniting and fellowshipping with each other. (See pp. 78-79)

In this passage, the narrator describes her identity with two explicit phrases: 1) a black woman, and 2) a great part of it is the encounters with my church. Church, family, and self are unified in this short passage that is overflowing with words that express her connectedness: "family," "connection," "unites," "relationship," "encounters," "spiritual joining," "everybody," "common," "shared," "we" (four times), "together," "our," "uniting," "fellowshipping," "with each other." Focus group members and the literature confirmed that the church, because of this spiritual joining, is very important to African Americans (Collins, 1990; Peterson, 1997).

Peterson (1997) identified the historical roots of this connection by explaining that forced Christianity was one mechanism that white landowners used to strip slaves of all vestiges of their native land. The incredible resiliency of black women is evident in the fact that they were able to turn this act, intended to ensure their subjugation, into a spiritual base that "enabled black people to come together to share in their faith and to heal their wounds" (Peterson, 1997, p. 171).

The integral nature of the participant-narrator's self, spirituality, and church community is clarified in a passage where she defines church not as a building to be entered but as an experience that enters her (see p. 79). "We do church! We do it! We inhale it! You inhale it. It just engulps you. It is the feelin' of the sense, the presence of God, and it's the sense of comraderie." Here she equates the "presence of God" with "the
sense of comraderie” and illustrates the internalization of both God and comrades as
something that is simultaneously *imposed*, “it just engulps you”, and *taken*. “We inhale
it”.

In a separate interview, the participant-narrator describes the internalization of her
faith explicitly: “No. presence of God ain’t just in that church! Presence of God is in, you
know. I think we all possess God. I think that His spirit is in every one of us since we are
all His creation. It’s in all of us. It’s just how far are you willin’ to let Him out” (see p.
79). This statement infers that she feels responsible for reciprocating the sharing of faith
by being “willin’ to let Him out.”

This interactive relationship was apparent at the black church service that I
observed. In contrast to the silent and sedate Lutheran services to which I am
accustomed, the participant-narrator’s service literally hummed with constant movement.
The pulpit seemed like a stage. I was never sure who was the minister because so many
men and women passed microphones back and forth, preaching and singing, moving
between several podiums, sitting with the choir but in contrasting robes, singing and
playing instruments at times alone and at other times in concert. Often people outside the
pulpit spoke and were answered by people from the pulpit and the sanctuary. Yet
everyone eventually (and often) merged into singing the same unprinted words together.
Nothing seemed planned, all seemed spontaneous, yet there was a strong feeling of unity
and cohesiveness. When the participant-narrator became physically exhausted from the
intensity of her worship, the woman next to her fanned her with a paper fan that had been
waiting in the bible holder, as if the two items shared equal importance. This mutual care
was communicated constantly all over the church, in these fannings, in supportive
touches and hugs, in taking turns holding babies, and in voices calling out affirmations
such as, “Oh. yes. Lord!” and, “You are so right!”

Gilligan (1982) also claimed that a woman’s identity is judged by a standard of
responsibility and care. Sharing with the church community was expected (hooks. 1990) and the same level of commitment to sharing was reflected in the participant-narrator’s concern for passing this experience. “the essence of bein’ black”, on to her sons (see p. 77).

I want them to experience a black church. Truly. The. the speakin’ in tongue. The holiness of it. The layin’ of the hands, the passin’ out, the music. the drums. the good. you now. the choir. the Un! Un! Un! You know. I want ‘em to experience all of it because in it, in it’s own little container. that’s the essence of bein’ black. To me.

This shared, reciprocal spirituality is a strong example of Gilligan’s (1982) claim that a woman’s identity is defined in a context of relationships of intimacy and care. Just as the participant-narrator hosts a steady stream of live-in houseguests. her soul is a home for anyone who will share her faith. The ultimate in intimacy. her spirit is a revolving door for all to use. to commune inside and to reciprocate outside. “It says in the Bible that he’ll come into you and sup with you and you with him. And he’s right at the door...He wants you to step right in that door and just commune with him. Everybody have that” (see p. 79-80).

**Connectedness: A Collective Sisterhood**

This responsibility orientation is a point of convergence for black and white women (Collins. 1990), and it should be noted that when the narrator refers to her sisterhood. she is referring to herself and five white friends. Gilligan (1977, 1982) explains that a responsibility orientation is central to women whose conceptions of self are rooted in a sense of connection and relatedness to others (as opposed to an independent rights orientation that is more common to men). Examples of the narrator’s responsibility orientation were plentiful: in her steady stream of live-in houseguests, in deciding to replace her weekly tithe to the church with grocery gift certificates for needy friends, and in many references to her desire to support various significant others.
Care and responsibility were fundamental to her career choice (nursing), and she demonstrated their priority when, in spite of having overwhelming medical bills, she refused a salary for running weekly free health clinics in church basements. She applied an injunction against hurting when she scolded her son for insulting the speech of his inner-city cousins and when she admonished her husband for criticizing the men with the broken spirits in her Chicago neighborhood.

The narrator’s extreme degree of responsibility is apparent in her compassion for even the people who caused her pain. On the few occasions that she was critical of someone, she balanced that criticism with moral reasoning, as when she criticized the one professor who had communicated prejudice to her (see p. 81). She referred to this woman as “Witchy-Poo”, a “demon”, and a “cold-blooded bitch”. In the next two sentences, however, she provides a justification for the woman’s behavior. “Her attitude could be based on her past experience, though. Blacks in general didn’t do that well in nursin’ so that was just a learned behavior for her.” Occasional references to her father’s illicit sexual behaviors are balanced with loving reminders that he was a good provider. The one comment she asked me to strike from the record was a remark that she thought reflected poorly on a mutual acquaintance.

A healthy, balanced level of responsibility was evident when it became difficult for her and her husband to finance their education. She made the decision to complete school first and let her husband drop out to earn money. She held her husband and sons to high expectations of respect and sharing of household chores. She also used careful deliberation before deciding whether to contribute cash to a potentially needy relative.

As the narrator’s story illustrates, the shared essence of being black has been communicated to her primarily through her church, and she wants to pass it on the same way. The type of communication that she valued in the black church is an Afrocentric call and response tradition where power dynamics are fluid, everyone has a voice, and
everyone is expected to listen and respond to other voices. (Collins, 1990). In contrast to my experience, the participant-narrator’s church carried on a dialogue. Everyone had a voice. Through dialogue, in church and in the home, black women have communicated an Afrocentric worldview that is holistic and seeks harmony (Collins, 1996).

*Connectedness: Dialogue and Voice*

White women, too, have developed a worldview that values dialogue and therefore is rooted in a sense of relatedness to others (Gilligan, 1977; Collins, 1996). For both black and white women, new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Collins, 1996). “A primary epistemological assumption underlying the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims is that connectedness is an essential component of the knowledge validation process” (Belenky et al. p. 18).

The narrator’s relational disposition in affirming knowledge is apparent in the many responses that consist of relating a dialogue with a significant other. It seemed that dialogue served to both evidence and reinforce her assertions. For example, when she explained her moral decision against misrepresenting her family income for financial aid purposes, instead of saying simply that she values honesty, she reported a conversation in which, “Mama said, ‘NayNay, I never had to lie about nothin’ and we ain’t gonna start now’” (see p. 71). In another response, she used dialogue and an exchange of views to understand people in their own terms (Gilligan, 1977) as in her first conversation with a white woman (see p. 66).

In the original literature review, I presented little of Gilligan’s (1977, 1982) work because Collins (1996) criticized her for studying primarily white, middle-class women. Yet this discussion has shown that they draw similar conclusions about women’s relational disposition and ethics of responsibility and care. The summaries of the work of
these women are hauntingly similar: According to Collins, “The words and actions of black woman intellectuals from different historical times and addressing remarkably different audiences resonate with a strikingly similar theme of the oneness of all human life” (p. 39). Similarly, Gilligan (1982) concluded that the white, middle-class women in her studies typically spoke of “the ongoing process of attachment that creates and sustains the human community” (p. 156). As the narrator has exemplified, dialogue is the tool that fosters this oneness (Baxter-Magolda, 1992; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Collins, 1990; Gilligan, 1977; hooks, 1989).

Dialogue requires that each participant have a voice. One of the reasons black women have been disadvantaged, according to Collins (1990), is that their voices have been stolen or ignored. Another experience that black and white women share, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) emphasized, is the powerlessness and voicelessness that women had internalized as a result of interactions with society.

In describing their lives, women commonly talked about voice and silence: “speaking up,” “speaking out,” “being silenced,” “not being heard,” “really listening,” “really talking,” “words as weapons,” “feeling deaf and dumb,” “having no words,” “saying what you mean,” “listening to be heard,” and so on in an endless variety of connotations all having to do with the sense of mind, self-worth, and feelings of isolation from or connectedness to others. (p. 18)

These authors conclude that the development of a sense of self, mind, and voice are intricately intertwined. Collins (1990) stated that her work is a therapeutic effort to reclaim her own lost voice as well as the collective voice of generations of suppressed women. The participant-narrator read the following passages and expressed appreciation for the same kind of fulfillment and renewal that she, too, found in women’s voices:

Black men may have excelled in the art of poetic preaching in the male-dominated church, but in the church of the home, where the everyday rules of how to live and how to act were established, it was black women who preached. There, black women spoke in a language, so rich, so poetic, that it felt to me like being shut off from life, smothered to
death, if one were not allowed to participate. (hooks, 1989, p. 5)

I remember the way we talked to one another, our words thickly accented black southern speech. We are rooted in language, wedded, have our being in words. (hooks, 1989, p. 28)

The metaphor of voice is ever-present in this study. In hours of observation and interviews over the period of three months, the participant-narrator told her story, a celebration of life, with an energy and beauty that was so consistent I came to define her as energetic and beautiful, full of beauty. This impression, to me, was so strong that the phrase, “have our being in words” fit her well. Her language was indeed, “so rich, so poetic” that, at times, phrases stuck in my head as song tunes sometimes do. I felt this most strongly in the following statement:

I found out that whites are just like I am: a wee different. They don’t like collard greens but basically they want the same things. They want to succeed, they want their children to succeed, they have hurts, they have fears. (see p. 67)

Her voice took on an upbeat rhythm that conveyed joyful self-pride in a related, equally rich, statement: “They embraced me with open arms and I embraced them. I actually learned to love ‘em but that didn’t surprise me. I knew I was capable of lovin’ other folks...” (see p. 66). Even when she was complaining about her mother, a poetic pulse was evident: “She wanted me to be a opera singer, I took five years of voice. She wanted a ballerina, I took ballet. She wanted a tap dancer, I took tap. She wanted a tennis star, I took tennis. I took jazz, I took piano, I took organ. I played the flute” (see p. 59).

The method of this study gave the participant-narrator an opportunity to tell her story and she seemed to embrace the opportunity by reflecting her being in her voice. Her manner of speech was dramatic storytelling with animated facial expressions, active body language, and voice tones that fluctuated, often dramatically, sometimes suddenly, from soft, tearful and poetic to wild, shrieking, and funny. An active, creative, bright mind was shared with an active, creative, bright voice.
Not only did the narrator make full use of her own voice, the processes of bracketing and construction identified constant references to voice. In 121 pages of transcripts over 1500 references to voice were identified, such as: “He said.” “she say.” “I go.” “I told you.” “cussin’.” “like I said.” “now. you talk about brilliant.” “she ain’t never lied.” Included in this count were dramatic voice changes used to indicate change of speaker as she presented mini-dialogues. Other uses of voice were more subtle. “We never wanted for nothin’. We may not have had everything we wanted but we never wanted for nothin’.” In this quote, the second use of the word wanted actually indicates the more intense condition, needed, but she did not use two different words or add adjectives to distinguish them. Instead, emphasis of voice indicated the difference.

The narrator also used dialogue to convey thoughts. She referenced a conversation with a deceased person. “I remember at her funeral tellin’ her....” and she jokes in her mind with the Holy Spirit. “Don’t come near us. Spirit. We too sharp. You may get hurt” (see p. 59). She expressed her prayers as dialogues with God. “Ain’t you ever just set and talked to God” (see p. 79). “Lord. are you tryin’ to tell me somethin’” (see p. 69). and she clearly believes God responds.

The narrator typically presents the epiphanies of her life by relating an interactive dialogue with God. “God. every once in awhile, allows us to have these whoopin’s happen to us so we can go. ‘Hmmm’...when I was on dialysis I said. ‘Hmmm,’ alotta times! ‘Hmmm. whatcha doin’. Lord?’ And I think my lesson was to appreciate life” (p. 80). Her story of a painful event illustrates how dialoguing with God served the dual purpose of providing guidance and enabling her to win the struggle. Her life changed abruptly the day her mother told her there was no more money for college (see pp. 68-69). As she relates the events of the day, each event is followed by a comment to God: “I asked God. ‘What can I do here,’” “I said, ‘Lord, I guess I’m not gonna be a doctor,’” “I said, ‘Well. I can sit here and do nothin’ or I could try to do somethin’.’”
She was obviously convinced that God spoke back:

“I was crying and prayin’ to God about what to do and I heard this commercial singing, ‘Be all that you can be.’ I looked up and said, ‘Lord, are you tryin’ to tell me somethin’?’ And this is the honest-to-God truth! My mother had read the paper that morning and she had left it open to a big old print advertisement about joining the army. I said, ‘Oh, Lord. You did tell me to call!’ So I called the recruiter.”

In these examples, dialogue helped the participant narrator win the struggle with the discouragement of being unable to work on her goal due to her economic status. As hooks (1989) noted, language is a place where the oppressed struggle “to recover ourselves – to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew” (p. 28).

**Connectedness: Student Development**

This discussion has affirmed the importance of voice, dialogue, and connectedness to the participant-narrator, the focus group members, and the Afrocentric women’s culture. As these themes of voice and connectedness emerged, literature was reconsulted and evidence was found that there is relevance to student development. As shown, the themes of connectedness and voice pervade the work of black woman college professors (hooks. 1989; Collins. 1990). “For African-American students, developing independence and autonomy seems to occur within the context of interdependence and relationships...” (McEwen, Roper, Bryant & Langa. 1990, p. 433). At predominantly white institutions, black student alienation (alienation is presumably a lack of feeling connected) has been found to be a strong predictor of black student attrition (Bean & Okinaka.1984). Affiliation opportunities and support play a significant role in the survival, success and development of African-American students at predominantly white institutions. Hughes (1987) found that black students’ affiliation needs were often fulfilled only off-campus, through the black community, black churches, and the extended family.
**Connectedness: Interdependence**

The majority of scholarship on college students has assumed that identity formation is similar for all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, spirituality, and other dimensions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). At the same time, theories of racial and gender identity development usually have failed to include other identity dimensions (Jones, 1997). It is also important to recognize that, due to the process of acculturation, individuals with the same ancestry may or may not share the same cultural values and behaviors (Atkinson, Morten, and Sue, 1993). This lack of integration and human complexity led me to begin this study with the assumption that a detailed exploration of racial identity theories would be the key to analysis.

However, I discovered that the participant-narrator's faith made her subjugated status a subjugated issue. With the belief (stated three times in various interviews) that "God said he would give us *all* the desires of the heart, and I'm included in all!" (see p. 84), she saw prejudice as an issue to be deftly tucked aside. She "wasn't lookin' for racism" (see p. 81). not in an avoidant manner, but in a manner that simply rejected the socially imposed obstacle. Faculty affirmed that the narrator seemed to rise above racial issues and focus group members identified with her practical approach to dealing with prejudice. This ability reflects her position in the highest level of each stage theory. Cross' (1995) internalization stage and Helms' (1995) integrative awareness status are evident in her sophisticated, open, expansive self-conception of blackness. Atkinson, Morten, and Sue’s (1993) Synergetic Articulation and Awareness stage is indicated by her generally high level of positive regard for her own and other minority groups as well as the dominant group. The narrator captures the essence of Josselson’s (1987) belief that Identity Achievement women are forever becoming when she states, “That's why I say I’m constantly changin’. That’s what we’re supposed to do in life – constantly change and grow” (see p. 101).
Thus a detailed discussion of any one racial identity theory seems unnecessary to this immediate discussion. More appropriate is a general look at her interdependent nature.

Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of psychosocial development is useful for its broad conceptual nature. This theory acknowledges the need to reflect on one's family of origin and ethnic heritage, to define oneself as part of a religious or cultural tradition, and to see self within a social and historical context. Of the seven vectors, two are especially pertinent to the theme of connectedness: *establishing identity* and *moving through autonomy toward interdependence*.

The establishing identity vector is a very general description of identity development. According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), a healthy identity is a solid sense of self that emerges as it becomes apparent that there is an *I* who coordinates the facets of personality, who owns the house of self and is comfortable in all its rooms. Descriptors attributed to the participant-narrator by former faculty members suggest that this comfort with self was in place during her successful college years: intact value system, adaptable, respected, knew her boundaries and weaknesses, responsible, persistent, motivated, disciplined, self-confident, a driving force for peers who she knew how to redirect, and able to understand and apply theory.

These descriptors also indicate that, as fundamental as the participant narrator's connections seemed to be, she maintained autonomy as well. Therefore, what I have called connectedness seems to be presented as *interdependence* in psychosocial theory, where the healthiest form of autonomy is not pure independence, but a balance of reliance on self and others. To emphasize this distinction Chickering renamed the developing autonomy vector of the original model "moving through autonomy toward interdependence" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Developing autonomy culminates in the recognition that one cannot operate in a
vacuum and that increasing autonomy enables healthier forms of interdependence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). There are examples of the narrator’s autonomy as a young adult. A first generation college student, she managed the college admissions process without parental support. She reported that she wanted to leave the neighborhood to get away from her mother’s control. She followed through with her plan to join the army in spite of strong protests by her most significant others. “I swore in, my mother and sisters in the background, mad as bulldogs” (p. 69). She demonstrated separation from her father when she admitted her frustration with her father’s refusal of the dentist’s tuition offer: “Yeah, that took a long time to forgive my father for. I ain’t forgot but I have forgiven him” (p. 71). During this time of maximum independence, she continued to value her relationship with her parents and to maintain connections with them. She also utilized other relationships: she requested the high school counselor’s help, spent many hours with her church youth group, encouraged a girlfriend to attend the same college, developed friendships, and got married.

With autonomy, new relationships based on equality and reciprocity replace older bonds (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Although her mother was the primary connection that directly linked the participant narrator to her family, church, and culture, at the appropriate age, the narrator was able to identify this connection as too controlling. As an adult, she is able to reflect back and determine that, compared to her sisters, “I got away so I could see who I was and learn different things, but my sisters are still there with Mama and can’t find themselves” (see p. 65). The need to be independent and the longing for inclusion had become a balanced relational disposition by the time the participant narrator became a successful college student.

Desire

Although the theme of connectedness is overwhelmingly strong, this discussion must include another important theme, her desire to attend college. Ironically, as
important as connections to family and culture were to her meaning-making, knowledge construction, and identity development, the participant-narrator's desire to attend college was made with no direct guidance from her family. As a matter of fact, it was made in spite of contradictory family values as evidenced by her mother's disappointing reaction to her college graduation (her parents did not attend). A variable that emerged early but that I neglected until the focus group session emphasized its importance was *intrinsic motivation*.

Deci and Ryan (1985) recognized that human beings attempt actively to master the forces in the environment and the forces of drives and emotions in themselves. "In mastering these forces, human beings integrate them into the internal, unified structure called self" (p. 8). They label this life force *intrinsic motivation*. The participant-narrator often used the word *desire* in contexts that suggest this was her definition of intrinsic motivation.

Being a first-generation college student with an illiterate father who never attended school, the narrator identifies no indicators of family influences on her determination to attend college. Her mother encouraged her to take many extracurricular lessons and encouraged her to finish high school. "All my brothers and sisters finished high school because you couldn't live in my mama's house and not finish high school. You could kill someone but you gotta finish high school" (see p. 63) Yet a high school diploma was the ultimate degree in their educational value system. "One brother and one sister went to college but there wasn't much fanfare for that" (see p. 64). This statement is affirmed by the fact that these two siblings attended college only briefly.

The process of telling her story led the narrator to discover the irony. After enthusiastically describing her father's pride and excitement on her first day of college, her voice tone calms as she tilts her head and observes in a pretty but distant voice, "And I thought that was so funny since it was never mentioned about college" (see p. 65). Her
father had actually interfered with her ability to attend college and she eventually reveals a long-term anger with him related to his refusal to accept her employer’s offer to pay for dental school.

With no apparent family reinforcement, the narrator’s desire to attend college was apparent at an early age and remained strong. Her favorite childhood role model was obviously her employer, a dentist, and she both states and demonstrates that she wanted to imitate his career path. Her desire seemed to blossom as she pretended to be a dentist during lunch breaks from this childhood job. Because she met few educated people, he is probably the key referent for her statement. “everybody I saw that was makin’ it was educated” (see p. 64). She followed her remark, “somebody told me that education is somethin’ nobody can take,” with a revealing twist. “and I had seen a lot taken!” (see p. 64). The ugliness of her neighborhood seemed to foster her desire: “The further you get into our neighborhood, the yuckier and yuckier and yuckier it gets” and the “sameness” of the people in her neighborhood reinforced it: “I will never be the same Jenay but the environment is exactly the same today...” (see p. 64) That sameness involved despair: "...there was alotta downness and I didn’t wanna stay there...The people become like walkin’ zombies...No hope. No nothin’” (see p. 64).

The narrator does identify a specific early influence on her desire to attend college. Since the story is told in entirety in two different interviews, referenced in another, and repeated at least twice during unrecorded participant observation sessions, it is safe to assume that this seemingly small incident was indeed a strong influence. As a child, she enjoyed accompanying her mother to the homes of wealthy white people because she took delight in the high-rise view of Lake Michigan, nice possessions, and the rich textures of beautiful, expensive fabrics in furniture and closets. Interestingly, her bright, curious mind noticed that these “rich” people were also educated people. “All the rich white people had degrees hanging on their walls. My puny mind equated that. ‘Now
these are rich people and they got degrees. We poor people. We don't have degrees. If I get those degrees. I can have somebody clean my house and my mama won't have to clean house no more!" (see p. 54).

The participant-narrator explicitly contrasts her mother's values with her own when she explains that her mother celebrated high school graduation while she, herself, viewed it as only the first of four graduations. "I wanted to earn a bachelors and masters and then Ph.D.‘" (see p. 63). Whenever she refers to the high school valedictorian and salutatorian who dropped out of college to abuse substances, she speaks of wastefulness. And she explicitly states that, "To me, education is the most important thing there is. other than love of Christ and family" (see pp. 68).

The participant-narrator's desire became so strong that when the family could no longer afford to pay college tuition, she joined the army for the sole purpose of earning tuition benefits. And when she was enrolled in a rigorous nursing program, she was able to solicit help because of her determination to be there with the "last cockaroaches" if necessary (see p. 75).

This evidence that the narrator consciously considered desire to be a prerequisite for success is reinforced by her explanation of why her high school peers dropped out of college. She attributed their failure to a lack of desire, in her words, "I don't know if they watched their mamas clean white people's toilets and saw the white people's degrees hangin' on their walls!" (see p. 54).

Desire is an important theme and the early evolution in the narrator's life of this characteristic suggests that, by the time students reach college, a strong level of intrinsic motivation may be in place. It is logical to assume that not all students will achieve an equally strong level of motivation. Intrinsic motivation is another characteristic that student development professionals can assess in order to determine whether interventions are needed. The following section discusses applied theory and suggests interventions for
students who lack intrinsic motivation and/or connectedness.

**Implications for Practice and Future Research**

This section provides a response to the third research question: What can be learned from this woman’s story that can guide future research and practice in student affairs? The discussion of implications for practice and suggestions for future research is integrated because all innovative practices must be evaluated for effectiveness.

Student development is a complex, never-finished tapestry. Many dimensions of development are yarns that have been plied together from finer threads, and there is a profuse and unknowable number of yarns from which to choose. Some ply evenly to form strong yarns; others are unevenly formed yet add character to the final piece. Not everyone finds the same strength and color in the same threads. Not everyone makes the same use of each thread. Not everyone is taught to weave; some must teach themselves or fall apart. The emergence of a strong and useful tapestry depends on the quality and interaction of many, many threads.

It is too early in the evolution of student development theory to describe one best process for successful weaving. In a historical study of a single subject, the important discussion is not which existing theory patterned her development. Rather, I have attempted to identify which elements, which yarns and threads, contributed to the healthy level of development, the beautiful and strong tapestry, that enabled her to be a successful student. By answering the second research question, identifying how elements of the life story relate to elements of research findings, I have uncovered some threads that could be used to help students weave a satisfying piece.

As I prepare to weave this into a discussion of the third research question I must reflect on what I, the researcher, learned from collaborating in this process. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) found that for many women, the real and valued lessons learned did not necessarily grow out of their academic work but in relationships
with friends, educators, life crises, and community involvement. I am fortunate that my academic work enabled me, together with the narrator, to appreciate and document the educational value of friends, educators, struggles, and connectedness.

I learned that being black and being a woman can be strengths, not weaknesses, even in a society that represses blacks and women. I learned that, although we are different colors, we are more alike than we are different. We both learned strength from our mothers and maintain it through women who we have welcomed into our lives as significant others. We both saw our fathers as dear men, but in contrast to the omniscience of our mothers, our fathers were largely bill-paying shadows who met their responsibilities outside the home, separate from us. We both were first generation college students, raised in large families, in low-income, isolated communities. We both appreciated the life-giving warmth and protectiveness of these communities yet longed to be released from their "sameness". We both longed to go to college. As she renews herself through visits to hometown and family, so do I. Upon our return from her childhood neighborhood, she verbalized my thought exactly by reflecting that she never laughs as hard as she does when she's with her mother and sisters. We both struggled with mothers who did not think we needed to attend college and both of our mothers are now proud that we did.

Because the important threads found here, connectedness and desire, are relevant to students of all races, and because connections were far more important to the participant-narrator than the race that she refused to let cause separation, this discussion has not focused on a specific racial or ethnic theory. Rather, suggestions have been made for facilitating feelings of connectedness and motivation in all students: black students, white students, women and those men who work more effectively through connections than through separation. The African American, female population was selected for study because of its under-representation in college student development literature. Yet it
shares this characteristic with all of the other minorities (collectively African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, American Indians, Alaska Natives) that are about to become the new majority in American colleges (Rendon & Hope, 1994a). Because behavior is a function of the person as it interacts with the environment (Lewin, 1929, cited in Mosak, 1989), student development professionals must consider what can be done to enable their campus environments to foster relationships.

As this study has suggested, an important, retention-related factor for new majority students appears to be making connections in college (Rendon & Garza, 1996). The keystone student affairs document mentioned in the Chapter One introduction to this study, the American College on Education's Student Personnel Point of View (1949), identified the fundamental assumption that student involvement with the academic community enhances learning. Astin (1999/1984) documented that involvement is necessary to student growth and development. Unfortunately, the new majority students do not easily get involved (Rendon & Hope, 1996; Schlossberg, 1984). Schlossberg (1984) and Rendon (1994) identified prerequisites to involvement for adult students.

According to Schlossberg (1984), the crippling feeling of marginality that is typical of adult students and may be a permanent condition for minority students must be offset by a feeling of mattering. Mattering, "our belief, whether right or wrong, that we matter to someone else" (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 9), weakens during transitional times when people are likely to wonder whether they make a difference, are missed, are needed, are cared for. The narrator demonstrates this dramatically in her transition from high school to college. "In our own little neighborhood we had been praised for our gifts and this was like a slap in the face of pure ice water." She attributes the dropping out of her friends, the high school valedictorian and salutatorian, to this feeling of marginality.

The concept of mattering is relevant to Chickering's vector of moving through autonomy toward interdependence. Emotional independence is defined as "freedom from
continual and pressing needs for reassurance, affection, or approval from others” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 117). College students who have not yet achieved this level of emotional independence will need support from the institution. As this study indicates, even students who have achieved a healthy level of interdependence will benefit from efforts to make them feel like they matter to other people.

Rendon (1994) demonstrated that validation can help students develop a feeling that they matter to someone on campus, an important factor related to retention (Rendon & Garza, 1996). Validation, Rendon's (1994) term for confirmation and support from family, peers, faculty, and other "in- and out-of-class agents" (p. 46), enables students to develop confidence in their ability to learn and can give them a feeling of competence which will enable their involvement. Chickering’s first vector identifies three types of competence, emotional, intellectual and social, that contribute to confidence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Validation, then, may be a prerequisite to developing competence, especially for new majority students who lack confidence.

hooks (1989) agreed that an absence of recognition and affirmation promotes self-doubt and adds that the best validators for black students are black professionals.

...concerned black students look to black professors for an example of ways to be whole, of ways to exist in this social context that allows celebration and acceptance of difference, ways to integrate rather than adapt, ways to be subject rather than object...Black students need to be acknowledged and affirmed by black professors. (hooks, 1989, p. 68)

Although it may be true that the best validators are black professionals, all professionals who interact with students have the potential to be validators. Because the applied principles of mattering and validation focus attention on an individual student, the individual's unique gender, ethnic and cultural differences receive attention no matter who the validator is.

Because this study has focused on a specific individual, suggestions will be made
for specific interventions utilizing Schlossberg’s (1984) and Rendon and Hope’s (1996) concepts of mattering and validation. The literature that is intended to provide guidance for student development professionals, including practitioners, program developers, and policy makers, will benefit from studies that test the effectiveness of these applied theories. As this study identifies the intense significance of human connections to one particular ethnic group, it seems important for these relational concepts to be tested on all types of students, collectively and separately, in order to sort out the relative meaningfulness of specific interventions for each type.

This study has suggested that an excellent method for validating African American female students is fostering dialogue, because it is through dialogue that we connect and create the opportunity to offer validation. In hooks’ classroom, all students are required to read aloud (1989). This seems like a minor practice, but hooks explained its importance:

> Often students who do have meaningful comments to contribute are silent. In my classes, everyone’s voice is heard as students read paragraphs which may explore a particular issue. They do not have the opportunity to refuse to read paragraphs. When I hear their voices, I become more aware of information they may not know that I can provide. Whether a class is large or small, I try to talk with all students individually or in small groups so that I have a sense of needs. (p. 54)

I know a Composition instructor who shares this philosophy and, just before the middle of each semester, forgoes a week of class sessions but requires students to meet with her individually for a short conference during that week. Although many faculty members engage students in dialogue either naturally, because they have extraverted personalities, or intentionally, because they realize the importance of dialogue, many faculty members communicate primarily through lecture. Administrators can establish policies that facilitate dialogue such as scheduling a conference week early in each semester, before students are lost to feelings of alienation. Where classes are large, student development
professionals can help instructors make individual human contact. When faculty and student development professionals work together to share guidelines and learning objectives for such sessions, a holistic approach to student development has occurred. The holistic approach is important to all students (ACE, 1949; ACPA, 1996) but may be especially pertinent to members of a social group that values connectedness.

Orientation should also be a time when students make connections. Faculty can again collaborate with student development professionals by participating in orientation activities. When my orientation session breaks for lunch, I assign students to tables according to their faculty advisor. This enables advisors to immediately connect with students in a small group and engage them in a preliminary, non-threatening dialogue. Faculty members who feel uncomfortable making “small talk” often request more outgoing student development professionals to join their group.

Campus environments need to physically reflect this comfortable, affirming atmosphere. Common areas on campus, including those in residence halls, should be arranged comfortably in order to foster spontaneous interaction among students and between students and staff. Furnishings and artwork should reflect elements of all relevant cultures. As Baxter Magolda (1995) has identified, peer dialogues offer students opportunities to explore their values and ideas and, even better, when student affairs staff join the dialogue, are more likely to construct independent beliefs rather than absorbing values through peer pressure. Anyone who genuinely extends respect and unconditional regard can be a validator, however. An interesting research project, for example, could be designed around locating a middle-aged, black, mother-figure in a homey residence hall lounge where many black women live.

Another example of a research focus that the findings of this study indicate would be particularly applicable to African American women would involve consideration of spirituality on campus. Love and Talbot (1999) noted that spirituality and spiritual
development have been conspicuously absent from student development theories and suggest that student development professionals need information and training in this area. Temkin and Evans (1998) presented evidence that spiritual development, particularly faith development, is an integral part of students' overall development and argue that it is too often ignored on college campuses. They suggest collaboration between student development professionals and campus religious professionals. These collaborations need to be rigorously developed, documented, and analyzed.

**Electronic Dialogue**

Those professionals who communicate best in writing can use journals and the internet to foster dialogue. Faculty members and student development professionals who offer orientation and other student development classes for credit can assign journals. To make this activity a dialogue, the student's journal must be returned promptly with written responses of the evaluator. This is easiest when the journal is passed back and forth via computer.

Electronic mail (e-mail) can be used to supplement in-class dialogue and can be especially effective when a student's learning style is too introverted for active participation in class discussions. By maintaining a computer base of student e-mail addresses, administrators and student development professionals finally have easy access to students. Academic and student affairs administrators, who generally learn of student achievements second-hand, can quickly and easily send a validating message to that student. An e-mail from a president or a dean can make a student feel like he/she matters.

Fostering student use of e-mail is an excellent way to foster dialogue. There is no easier or faster way to dialogue with a student than to respond to an electronic message. With user-friendly programs, an increasingly computer-proficient student population, and the popularity of this communication tool, policies that encourage computer use can easily be implemented. Of course, this early in the technological age, it is important to
pay special attention to older students who have had little or no exposure to computer use. Student development professionals need to provide computer workshops that cover such basics as turning the computer on and overcoming the fear of touching a keyboard, and computer labs should be staffed with patient assistants.

Electronic mail can be a critical tool for increasing college accessibility. Today's high school students have never known a time when computers did not exist and seem to embrace and enjoy them. Young people who may not have the means to access a college campus can talk to campus experts via a study-hall or library computer. First-generation students who are unsure of what needs to be asked can take the risk of initiating a discussion because the communication is not face-to-face. Yet a face-to-face quality response is possible when admissions staff have appropriate writing skills. For the same reason, even painfully shy people and people with serious physical disabilities can approach college staff. Through electronic dialogue, distance, closed doors, and intimidating building designs no longer need be a roadblock for these students.

Summary

The initial literature review for this study provided a broad overview of student development theory. Through the qualitative research process, emergent themes became the focus of a discussion intended to provide seeds for future research and practice. The omnipresent theme, connectedness, subsumed the themes of voice, dialogue, family, faith, and culture. Since dialogue can serve to validate students, help students feel like they matter, and develop competence, it seems likely that there is an especially strong need for making positive connections with students who come to college with no intrinsic motivation or desire to succeed academically. Student development professionals have "a long tradition of attending to the relational mode" (Baxter Magolda, 1995, p. 215) and ideas for fostering this tradition have been presented in this chapter.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY, FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the research findings and includes a discussion of the significance, possible meanings, and implications of the study. From the findings associated with this study, recommendations are identified for further research. Limitations are discussed and conclusions are provided.

Summary of the Study

Traditionally, quantitative methods that take brief glimpses of students through surveys and brief interviews have been used to study as many students as possible. While these studies have provided valuable information, students are complex and the generalizations that are made from these studies may mask individual differences. Today's student population is diversifying at an especially rapid rate (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993; Attinasi & Nora, 1996; Rendon & Hope, 1996), thus new research methods that recognize individual differences are needed now more than ever before. Therefore, the qualitative, interpretive approach of narrative inquiry was utilized in this study to take an in-depth look at the meaningful lifetime events of an African American, female, college student.

A review of the literature began with a general overview of student development theory. Because these foundational studies are primarily Eurocentric, the progression and eventual diversity of psychosocial, intellectual, and moral development theory was explored and the work of major black woman intellectuals was presented.

The literature search uncovered no comprehensive theoretical framework that addressed African American female college student development. For this reason, an advantage of the qualitative approach was that relevant themes were allowed to emerge, then were merged into the interview and analysis process, and new insights were
identified. A theme that emerged early as relevant to African American women was connectedness. Utilizing the qualitative process, this theme was used as the explicit focus of a more specific literature review and of an interview session with the participant-narrator in which the special import of connectedness to female African-American women was illuminated. The process also identified a tool for fostering that connection, dialogue, and emphasized that dialogue must be affirming and validating. With this insight, suggestions for future research and practice were identified.

Narrative analysis was used to create a thick description of one relevant individual’s life story. Throughout the research process, qualitative procedures were applied to assure trustworthiness. Credibility was sought by using consensual validation, triangulation of sources and methods, and member checks. As a final credibility check, three African American women, all practitioners in higher education, evaluated the research process and first draft of the paper in an intensive focus group session.

Confirmability was achieved by preserving an audit trail made up of raw data, notes, transcripts, documents, drafts, and comments from member checks. A methodological log was maintained in order to document how the research evolved and how data was collected, analyzed, interpreted, and reviewed. Field notes included bracketed themes and concepts that related to existing theories. Transferability was enhanced by generalizations to educational literatures.

Subjectivity, an integral part of qualitative research, was utilized as a tool to help the participant make meaning of her experiences and to make connections with research. To facilitate identification of researcher bias, a personal journal was kept during the data collection process and an introduction to myself, the researcher, and my intent was included in this report.
Purpose of the Study

The specific purpose of the proposed qualitative study was to interpret, record and analyze the life experiences of a professional woman who successfully completed a rigorous, three-year post-secondary diploma program, obtained and maintains a successful professional career, maintains an active alumni status, and manages a family and life-threatening illness. The detailed exploration of a single person's experience was intended to unearth elements that are invisible in traditional, quantitative research and not immediately apparent in initial qualitative interviews. The intent was also to extend the participant the respect of allowing her to speak for herself, to analyze her own experiences, and to comment on the analysis of the researcher.

Research Questions

Three questions focused the exploration for this research study.

1. What is the life story of an academically average, persistent, motivated, African American female who was raised in an urban, low-income neighborhood, graduated from a predominantly white institution of higher education in Iowa, maintains an active career and community service commitment, and manages a family and life-threatening illness?

2. How do elements (family and individual characteristics, life events, interactions, personal meanings) of this life story relate to factors that have been identified by existing research findings as related to student development, especially African American persistence in higher education?

3. What can be learned from this woman's story that can guide future research and practice in student affairs?
Summary of the Findings

As a result of this research study, I have developed five propositions:

1. Female African American students have a stronger need than most students to make affirming, validating connections with their environment.

2. Student development professionals need to do more than simply create opportunities for involvement on college campuses. Not all students have achieved a level of competence that enables them to participate of their own volition. Student development professionals must aggressively foster connections on campus, especially for students who have been identified as minorities according to predominant characteristics of their particular student bodies.

3. Dialogue is the tool that fosters human connections. When dialogue is validating, it can help students feel like they matter and give them the confidence they need to become involved, successful students.

4. Intrinsic motivation is developed over a lifetime. Both successes and failures can serve to increase intrinsic motivation. Identifying the level of motivation a student has internalized will help student affairs professionals judge how much validation a student needs.

5. Students have shared characteristics as well as distinct differences. We need to celebrate our commonalities and connections as we respect and celebrate our diversity. Our human commonality is a need for care; all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, or gender, need to feel like someone cares. All student development professionals, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, or gender, are capable of applying a validating ethic of care.
Implications of the Findings

The Student Learning Imperative (SLI) (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 2000) was developed in order to provide discussion of "how student affairs professionals can intentionally create the conditions that enhance student learning and personal development" (p. 1). It is a call to transform student affairs practice to promote student learning and personal development as "inextricably intertwined and inseparable" (p. 2) aspects of the educational process.

The research reported here supports the already widely acknowledged premise that positive interpersonal supports facilitate student development. Sanford (1962) discussed support in his seminal student development theory and Fleming (1984), in her foundational study of black students, wrote, "my research suggests that intellectual energy is fired by the warmth of interpersonal connections" (p. xiii).

This study has verified the need for meeting affiliation needs in the college setting. According to one successful student who was adept at making connections and to research that supports the importance of connections and the difficulty of some students have achieving them, higher education practitioners need to facilitate student development by fostering connections.

The propositions that have resulted from this research study suggest that it is not enough to offer opportunities for involvement (Kuh, Schuh, & Whitt, 1991). Student development professionals need to create an affirming atmosphere that enables students to take advantage of those opportunities. Elements of a model that can create such an atmosphere have emerged from this analysis: Students need to feel connected. Dialogue, if validating, helps students feel like they matter, which facilitates development of competence, which enables involvement: \( \text{Dialogue} + \text{validation} + \text{mattering} + \text{competence} + \text{involvement} = \text{connectedness}. \)

By collaborating with faculty to facilitate faculty-student connections, by making...
our own interpersonal connections with students, by adopting an affirming, validating mission and an attitude of unconditional positive regard, and by ensuring that, especially for underrepresented students, involvement opportunities are introduced and conducted through affirming, validating, interpersonal dialogue, we are fostering students' motivation for success.

Our human commonality is a need for care. All students, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, or gender, need to feel like someone cares. All student development professionals, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, or gender, need to conduct practice and research with an integrative purpose, an inclusive method, and an attitude of unconditional positive regard. As Baxter Magolda (1995) reminded us, student development professionals have a long tradition of attending to the relational mode. The value of fostering this tradition has been established by this study.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by the following conditions:

1. The study focused on a single participant. It may be argued that the findings are applicable only to her experience and to a specific time and places.

2. Various individual characteristics may have affected the findings. For example, this study has identified the participant as an extrovert. Because the concept of connectedness is a relationship dimension, very different conclusions may have been reached if the participant were someone with an introverted learning style.

3. A study of this limited magnitude cannot begin to address the many dimensions that are related to successful student development. Only a few of the many potentially relevant threads have been explored here.

4. Although the purpose of this particular study was to identify common threads, there continues to be a need for development of comprehensive theories that foster understanding of specific populations.
Recommendations for Future Study and Research

A number of recommendations can be drawn from the findings of this study.

1. The qualitative research methodology is useful for identifying specific experiences and meanings that facilitate student development. The wide variety of related methods may be especially appropriate to new populations. For example, methods that utilize oral narrative are especially appropriate to the study of women because of the technique's focus on dialogue and the relevance of dialogue to women's knowledge development and meaning-making.

2. A need exists for more research on the multiple dimensions of identity development including potentially self-defining characteristics such as race, class, religion, sexual orientation and gender. More studies that apply specifically to previously under-represented populations are needed. At the same time, there are enough commonalities in human experience that inclusive studies will have great value as well. For example, in light of claims that the feminist movement has overlooked black women (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1990; Scott, 1991), research that focuses on shared characteristics of women of all colors could unify women's political efforts. An analysis comparing the work of Collins (1990), Gilligan (1982), Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986), Josselson (1987), and Baxter Magolda (1995) would provide an interesting starting point.

4. Existing theories of student development can be used as springboards for studies of separate and inclusive populations. For example, McEwen, Roper, Bryant and Langa (1990) suggested incorporating the nine issues they found to be relevant to African American students into an existing psychosocial theory.

5. Research must include collaborative efforts between student affairs staff, faculty, religious staff, and other members of the campus community.

6. All interventions must be evaluated. Studies exploring how mattering and
validation impact student involvement can involve all members of the campus community and contribute to improved programs and practices in all aspects of student development.

**Conclusions**

This qualitative study was intended to contribute to a better understanding of college student development, especially as it relates to persistence of African American female students. The findings of this study must be understood in relation to the limitations of the qualitative methodology, the focus on a single, volunteer participant, and a specific time and place. All of these factors are limitations of the study. However, the methods and procedures honored the integrity and rigor of qualitative research.

From the relationship that was the core of this study, I learned meaningful lessons. I learned that different people are very much alike. I learned that our differences can be knowable, and therefore manageable, if we connect with each other. I learned that dialogue is necessary to make connections possible. I learned that if dialogues are conducted according to principles of care and responsibility, we can achieve "a principled connectedness that promotes the distinctive self-development of each and every one of us" (hooks & West, 1991, p. 62).

Although there is no such thing as a typical black person (McEwen, Roper, Bryant, & Langa, 1990) or a typical white person or a typical student, the meanings I have identified are, at the very least, reminders to conduct research and practice by being "candid about one's self and contestatory toward the dehumanizing forces in the world" (hooks & West, 1991, p. 62).
APPENDIX A

HUMAN SUBJECTS
Information for Review of Research Involving Human Subjects
Iowa State University

(Please type and use the attached instructions for completing this form)

1. Title of Project
Oral narrative and analysis of one African American female student's struggle for success in higher education

2. I agree to provide the proper surveillance of this project to ensure that the rights and welfare of the human subjects are protected. I will report any adverse reactions to the committee. Additions to or changes in research procedures after the project has been approved will be submitted to the committee for review. I agree to request renewal of approval for any project continuing more than one year.

Kathleen M. Clauson
Typed name of principal investigator

1-19-00
Date

Kathleen M. Clauson
Signature of principal investigator

Higher Education
Department

515-643-6609
Phone number to report results

3. Signatures of other investigators

Date
Relationship to principal investigator

2/1/00

4. Principal investigator(s) (check all that apply)

☐ Faculty ☐ Staff ☑ Graduate student ☐ Undergraduate student

5. Project (check all that apply)

☐ Research ☑ Thesis or dissertation ☐ Class project ☐ Independent Study (490, 590, Honors project)

6. Number of subjects (complete all that apply)

# adults, non-students: 11 # minors under 14: 0 # minors 14 - 17: 0

# ISU students: 0 other 0

(explain):

7. Brief description of proposed research involving human subjects: (See instructions, item 7. Use an additional page if needed.)
See attached abstract

8. Informed Consent: ☑ Signed informed consent will be obtained. (Attach a copy of your form.)

☐ Modified informed consent will be obtained. (See instructions, item 8.)

☐ Not applicable to this project.

(Please do not send research, thesis, or dissertation proposals.)

http://www.grad-college.iastate.edu/forms/HumanSubjects.doc
9. Confidentiality of Data: Describe below the methods you will use to ensure the confidentiality of data obtained. (See instructions, item 9.)
Identifiers will be blacked out in all field notes, pseudonyms will be used in all text.

10. What risks or discomfort will be part of the study? Will subjects in the research be placed at risk or incur discomfort? Describe any risks to the subjects and precautions that will be taken to minimize them. (The concept of risk goes beyond physical risk and includes risks to subjects' dignity and self-respect as well as psychological or emotional risk. See instructions, item 10.)
None. The researcher is an experienced counselor/interviewer and is sensitive to non-verbal signs of discomfort. The researcher will not probe for information the subjects do not want to provide.

11. CHECK ALL of the following that apply to your research:
A. Medical clearance necessary before subjects can participate
B. Administration of substances (foods, drugs, etc.) to subjects
C. Physical exercise or conditioning for subjects
D. Samples (blood, tissue, etc.) from subjects
E. Administration of infectious agents or recombinant DNA
F. Deception of subjects
G. Subjects under 14 years of age and/or H. Subjects 14 - 17 years of age
I. Subjects in institutions (nursing homes, prisons, etc.)
J. Research must be approved by another institution or agency (Attach letters of approval)

If you checked any of the items in 11, please complete the following in the space below (include any attachments):
Items A–E Describe the procedures and note the proposed safety precautions.

Items D–E The principal investigator should send a copy of this form to Environmental Health and Safety, 118 Agronomy Lab for review.

Item F Describe how subjects will be deceived; justify the deception; indicate the debriefing procedure, including the timing and information to be presented to subjects.

Item G For subjects under the age of 14, indicate how informed consent will be obtained from parents or legally authorized representatives as well as from subjects.

Items H–I Specify the agency or institution that must approve the project. If subjects in any outside agency or institution are involved, approval must be obtained prior to beginning the research, and the letter of approval should be filed.

http://www.grad-college.iastate.edu/forms/HumanSubjects.doc
Checklist for Attachments and Time Schedule

The following are attached (please check):

12. □ Letter or written statement to subjects indicating clearly:
   a) the purpose of the research
   b) the use of any identifier codes (names, #s), how they will be used, and when they will be removed (see item 17)
   c) an estimate of time needed for participation in the research
   d) if applicable, the location of the research activity
   e) how you will ensure confidentiality
   f) in a longitudinal study, when and how you will contact subjects later
   g) that participation is voluntary; nonparticipation will not affect evaluations of the subject.

13. □ Signed consent form (if applicable)

14. □ Letter of approval for research from cooperating organizations or institutions (if applicable)

15. □ Data-gathering instruments

16. Anticipated dates for contact with subjects:
   First contact
   January 28, 2000
   Month/Day/Year
   Last contact
   April 20, 2000
   Month/Day/Year

17. If applicable: anticipated date that identifiers will be removed from completed survey instruments and/or audio or visual tapes will be erased:

   April 20, 2000
   Month/Day/Year

18. Signature of Departmental Executive Officer

   Signature:
   3/1/00
   Date
   Department or Administrative Unit
   EC PS

19. Decision of the University Human Subjects Review Committee:

   Project approved
   □ Project not approved
   □ No action required

   Name of Human Subjects in Research Committee Chair
   Patricia M. Keith
   Date
   2-11-00
   Signature of Committee Chair
   □
Lay Summary

I am working on my PhD in Higher Education at Iowa State University. This requires that I perform some sort of research that will be valuable to higher education professionals.

I’m studying ____ because she is a successful graduate and seems to love the career that her education has afforded her. Because she is an African American woman, and because African American women have higher dropout rates than white mean and women. I’d like to find out exactly what experiences in her life helped her be successful. If I can learn about details of her life story, perhaps I can uncover some things (like family and individual characteristics, life events, interactions, personal meanings) that will help other students like her be successful.

I will ask you questions about ____ and things she has told me that have contributed to her success. I won’t take more than one or two hours of your time, and I promise that your privacy will be protected (I will use pseudonyms in place of actual names). I will tape this session, but the tape will be erased as soon as my project is complete. Pieces of information will be preserved in my doctoral dissertation, but as I’ve said, those will be anonymous.

Thank you for your time and please sign your name below if you will agree to talk with me about ____.

__________________________  _______________________
Signature                  Date
Interview Questions

Sample questions for the Participant Narrator:

Create an annal: Please work with me in drawing a timeline of the significant events in your life up until now. Identify approximately 15 – 20 events and chart them, in chronological, on posterboard. Suggestions for events: memorable experiences, experiences that changed you in some way, experiences that were very important to you: educational events.

Why did you decide to go to college?
What people influenced your decision to go to college?

What challenges or obstacles have you encountered in your education and career?
Who/what helped you overcome those challenges?

Who/what do you have/have you had in the past for support systems?

Tell me about your parents and their goals for you.
Tell me about educational experiences of family members.

Tell me about your goals. Looking back over your life, have those goals been consistent?

Sample questions for significant others:

Tell me about ____. How do you feel about her educational and career progress. Did you expect/want her to grow up to be what she has become? Why/why not?
Tell me how you think you have influenced ____.
How has ____ influenced you?

Sample questions for instructors:

Did you think ____ was a “good” student? Why/why not?
Tell me about any specific interactions that you recall having with ____.
REFERENCES CITED


