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Negotiating Sociocultural Discourses: The Counter-Storytelling of Academically (and Mathematically) Successful African American Male Students

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This study documents the counterstories of four academically (and mathematically) successful African American male students. Using participative inquiry, the participants were asked to read, reflect on, and respond to historical and current research literature regarding the schooling experiences of African American students. Their responses were analyzed using a somewhat eclectic theoretical framework that included poststructural theory, critical race theory, and critical theory. Collectively, the participants' counterstories revealed that each had acquired a robust mathematics identity as a component of his overall efforts toward success. How the participants acquired such "uncharacteristic" mathematics identities was to be found in part in how they understood sociocultural discourses of U.S. society and how they negotiated the specific discourses that surround male African Americans. Present throughout the counterstories of each participant was a recognition of himself as a discursive formation who could negotiate sociocultural discourses as a means to subversively repeat his constituted "raced" self.

KEYWORDS: achievement, achievement gap, Black education, mathematics education, student development, urban education

Historically, there has been a lack of research examining the specific mathematics schooling *experiences* of students from various ethnic and socioeconomic groups (Lubienski & Bowen, 2000). Mathematics education research has most often focused, both philosophically and theoretically, on the *individual* acquiring mathematics knowledge and understanding, slighting the

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dynamics of the social contexts, inside and outside the classroom, in which it has been learned (Lerman, 2000). Much of this research takes for granted that students pass through the threshold of the mathematics classroom with equal dispositions, or belongingness (Allexsaht-Snider & Hart, 2001), toward the discipline of mathematics. In the past decade or so, however, a growing number of scholars have provided a counterargument, extending the focus of mathematics education research into the sociocultural and sociohistorical arenas to more fully understand the mathematics schooling experiences of students (see, e.g., Atweh, Forgasz, & Nebres, 2001; Boaler, 2000; Burton, 2003; Nasir & Cobb, 2007; Powell & Frankenstein, 1997; Secada, Fennema, & Adajian, 1995; Walshaw, 2004). Lerman (2000) termed this extension the "*social turn* in mathematics education research" (p. 23). Yet, in making the social turn, he cautioned that the greatest challenge for mathematics education researchers will be to "develop accounts that bring together agency, individual trajectories (Apple, 1991), and the cultural, historical, and social origins of the ways people think, behave, reason, and understand the world" (p. 36).

Research by scholars who have made the social turn (see, e.g., Boaler, 1998; Gutstein, 2003; Setati, 2005; Walshaw, 2001) has addressed Lerman's (2000) caveat. This body of research consistently supports Weissglass's (2002) assertion that the historical contexts and the sociocultural discourses in which mathematics and mathematics teaching and learning are embedded have a significant impact on the mathematics learning and performance of students, especially those students who have been historically marginalized, such as African American,[1] Latino/a, Native American, Caribbean, and economically disadvantaged students and female students in general. Similarly, Gates and Vistro-Yu (2003) argued that although looking internally for plausible solutions to the underachievement of students in mathematics is a necessary condition, "it is by no means sufficient" (p. 63). Specifically, they called for "a degree of social consciousness and responsibility in seeing the wider social and political picture" (p. 63). Such an adoption of social consciousness and responsibility greatly broadens the dimensions of the examination, delving deeper into how the cultural, economic, political, and social discourses of society in general affect the construction of students, teachers, and mathematics.

The study reported in this article, derived from my dissertation (Stinson, 2004), is a broad examination of mathematics achievement that brings together agency and the sociocultural and sociohistorical ways that people think, behave, reason, and understand the world by examining the construction (but not the determination) of four academically (and mathematically) successful African American male students. In particular, I examined the influence of sociocultural and sociohistorical discourses on the agency of four African American men in their early 20s who had demonstrated achievement and persistence in school mathematics (K–12). Although the study began as an exploration of the participants' achievement and persistence in school mathematics, it quickly expanded beyond their experiences with mathematics and into an exploration of *how* particular sociocultural and sociohistorical discourses affected their agency as they negotiated those discourses in their

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pursuit of success. In other words, the participants' achievement and persistence in school mathematics were just two components in their larger efforts toward academic success. Therefore, while the study began with a zoomed-in analytical lens on the participants' experiences with mathematics, I promptly refocused the lens, as suggested by Lerman (2001), zooming out so that I might address the practices and meanings (i.e., methods of negotiation) within which my African American male participants became school-mathematical actors (Lerman, 2001).[2]

The study was motivated by my 5-year experience as a White mathematics teacher in a Black high school. This experience exposed me to many young Black male (and female) students who performed not only just as well as White students on measures of academic achievement but also, in many cases, better than most White students, or better yet, aimed toward academic "levels of excellence" (Hilliard, 2003, p. 138). This experience with academically successful African American students was counter to much of the research literature about African American students, and African American male students in particular, in that the literature about male African Americans most often focuses primarily on their social pathology (Polite & Davis, 1999). To place into question this social pathology literature, I provide the counterstories of academic success of four African American male students. In effect, through this study, I aimed to assist in contributing a different sociocultural and sociohistorical discourse about African American male students. Two two-part research questions guided the study:

1. How did participants define success? To what sociocultural factors did they attribute their academic, and mathematics, success?
2. What sociocultural and sociohistorical discourses about male African Americans shaped participants' perceptions of themselves as mathematics learners and as African American students? How did they negotiate those discourses?

Within the context of the study, the phrase "mathematics learner" is derived from Martin's (2000) concept of *mathematics identity*, defined as students' beliefs about their mathematics abilities, their beliefs about the instrumental importance of mathematics, their beliefs about the opportunities and constraints that exist to participate in mathematics, and their motivations to obtain mathematics knowledge. The term *discourses* includes language and institutions as well as complex signs and practices that order and sustain sociocultural and sociohistorical constructed forms of social existence: forms that work to either confirm or deny the life histories and experiences of the people who use them (Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom, 1996). In short, capital-*D Discourses* are innumerable and "are always language plus other 'stuff'" (Gee, 1999, p. 17).[3] And *agency* is broadly defined as the participants' ability to accommodate, reconfigure, or resist the available sociocultural discourses that surround male African Americans in order for them to effectively negotiate these discourses in their pursuit of success. In other words, agency, in this context, extends beyond their mathematical agency (see Gutstein, 2006,

2007, for a discussion of students' mathematical agency). Moreover, the intended meaning of the term *negotiate* is its more robust definition: "to deal with (some matter or affair that requires ability for its successful handling)" (i.e., to accommodate); "to arrange for or bring about through conference, discussion, and compromise" (i.e., to reconfigure); or "to successfully travel along or over" (i.e., to navigate, or in this context to resist) (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 1999). Or, said more directly, there are three ways to negotiate: by "sucking it up," by compromising, or by refusing to yield.

Theoretical Framework

Martin (2000), in his study examining mathematics success and failure among African American youth, developed a multilevel framework for analyzing mathematics socialization and identity among African American students; it included an analysis of sociohistorical context, community and school forces, and individual agency. His analysis of sociohistorical context included an examination of the social and historical policies and practices of racism and discrimination (i.e., White supremacy) that prevent African Americans "from becoming equal participants in mathematics and other areas of society" (p. 29). His analysis of community and school forces included an examination of how African American students' beliefs about mathematics and about African Americans as learners of mathematics are influenced by the beliefs and expectations held by community members and school personnel. And his analysis of individual agency included an examination of mathematically successful African American students as they responded to community and school forces.

After Martin's (2000) initial analysis of 35 mathematically successful seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade African American students, he claimed, "Students are capable of recognizing and responding to . . . [community and school] forces in ways that help them resist the negative forces and to take advantage of the positive forces that they encounter" (p. 185). He suggested that a further analysis of mathematically successful African American students could provide insight into how students negotiated community and school forces and "how these forces can serve as barriers or springboards to success" (p. 125). Taking note of Martin's suggestion, I argue that a study that aims to expose the complexities of how successful African American male students resist, oppose, or even reconfigure negative sociocultural forces as they embrace those forces that are positive requires a "somewhat eclectic" (Sfard, 2003, p. 354) theoretical approach.

Sfard (2003; see also 1998) defended the necessity of using a somewhat eclectic theoretical approach as she attempted to understand the complexities of mathematics teaching and learning. She stated, "Educational theories, like practical solutions, respond badly to being left alone. They can thrive only in the company of other theories" (p. 355). She further argued that controversies within different theoretical paradigms "are very often, if not always, an outcome of differences between underlying metaphors" (p. 355). Rather

than viewing educational theories as incompatible, Sfard suggested, they should "be viewed as either *complementary*—that is, concerned with different aspects of the same phenomena—or *incommensurable*—that is, speaking different languages rather than really conflicting with each other" (p. 355).

The eclectic theoretical framework of this study, in a manner of speaking, thrives by drawing on tenets from poststructural theory (see, e.g., St. Pierre, 2000), critical race theory (CRT; see, e.g., Tate, 1997), and critical (postmodern) theory (see, e.g., Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, 2000). In other words, I borrowed theoretical concepts and methodological processes from these three frameworks that I used side by side while conducting the study, resulting in what I believe to be "good" education research (Hostetler, 2005) that produced different knowledge and produced knowledge differently (St. Pierre, 1997b). While borrowing tenets from these theoretical frameworks, I do not intend to suggest that these frameworks share the same philosophical foundations; I understand that the ontological, epistemological, and ethical considerations of these frameworks are different (Paul & Marfo, 2001). For the purpose of this study, however, I followed Sfard's (2003) suggestion and viewed these differences as complementary and/or incommensurable. Furthermore, this eclectic approach refuses the "folk theories" regarding African American male adolescents (Lee, 2003) and echoes the Commission on Research in Black Education's recommendation for a "*cultural praxis*" methodology (King, 2005). Specifically, it provides "a nonlinear overlapping polycentric approach with simultaneous, multiple centers of activity that, like jazz music, combined discipline, improvisation, and individuality" (King, 2005, p. 16).

In general, I characterize the eclectic theoretical framework as a critical postmodern[4] framework, which places concepts from critical theory, such as empowerment, class struggle, asymmetric relations of power, praxis, and so forth, under critique, while providing postmodern theory a foundation that precludes it from being perceived as nihilistic or inactive (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). Or, as Lather (1991, 2007) suggested, postmodern theory helps us "get smart" about the limits and possibilities of critical theory. I next provide a synopsis of each of the theoretical frameworks, stating explicitly what each framework contributed to the study; more specific details of theoretical concepts borrowed from the frameworks are discussed, in turn, as I present the study's findings.

Poststructural Theory

Poststructural theory adopts an anti- or post-epistemological standpoint and is fiercely antifoundationalist and antirealist, rejecting the established picture of knowledge as an accurate or "true" representation (Peters & Burbules, 2004). In part, poststructural theory provides theoretical critiques and language that redefines terms, such as *person* and *agency*, among many others (St. Pierre, 2000). For instance, the poststructural critique redefines a person as a discursively constituted subject (cf. Foucault, 1969/1972) rather than as an individual. The term *individual* implies that there is an "independent and

rational being who is predisposed to be motivated toward social agency and emancipation—what Descartes believed to be the existence of a unified self" (Leistyna et al., 1996, p. 341). Poststructural theory rejects this notion of an essential, unified self who is always present, because it minimizes the force of sociocultural discourses on the person. Effectively, the subject of poststructural theory is subjugated, but not determined, by the sociocultural discourses that constitute the person (Butler, 1990/1999).

Although it might appear that the discursively constituted subject lacks the ability to act, the subject of poststructural theory does possess agency, albeit a retheorized agency (St. Pierre, 2000). This retheorized agency of the subject produces at once a restricting effect on the production of knowledge and actions and an enabling effect on the production of different (and at times subversive) kinds of knowledge and actions (Butler, 1990/1999). Agency, therefore, within the poststructural frame, is "up for grabs, continually reconfigured and renamed as is the subject itself . . . [and] seems to lie in the subject's ability to decode and recode its identity within discursive formations and cultural practices" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 504). In short, this redefining of agency enables a different logic "in which structure and agency are not either-or but both-and and, simultaneously, neither-nor" (Lather, 1991, p. 154).

The redefining of the subject and agency was a significant theoretical shift borrowed from poststructural theory throughout this study. By using this shift, I began with the acknowledgment of research participants—characterized as discursive subjects, not as individuals—who negotiated (consciously or not) sociocultural discourses regarding male African Americans.

Critical Race Theory

CRT begins with the notion that racism is "normal, not aberrant, in American society," resulting in its appearing both normal and natural to people in U.S. culture (R. Delgado, cited in Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). Theoretically, CRT provides a different theoretical analysis of how the discourses of race and racism operate within U.S. social structures, an analysis that keeps race in the foreground. Moreover, because CRT borrows theories and methodologies from liberalism, law and society, feminism, Marxism, and poststructuralism (Tate, 1997), it acts as a bridge in this study between the often dichotomized theories of poststructural theory and critical theory (cf. Hill, McLaren, Cole, & Rikowski, 2002).

CRT asserts that race is a permanent and endemic component of U.S. society and culture (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Bell (1992) wrote, "Black people will never gain full equality in this country. . . . This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance" (p. 12). Equally as important, CRT allows and finds value in the storytelling of the individual experience. Specifically, CRT values "counterstories," stories of "raced" people whose experiences are often not told; stories that expose, analyze, and challenge the majoritarian stories of racial privilege (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT also maintains a

critique of liberalism and argues for radical solutions, and it claims that Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation (Ladson-Billings, 1998). There are no common or agreed-on doctrines or methodologies of CRT; however, CRT scholars are united in two common goals: to understand the construction and perpetuation of the privileged White ideology of the United States and to radically disrupt the bond between law and racial power (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

The analytical process of foregrounding race as a permanent and endemic component of U.S. society and culture, borrowed from CRT, amends the ethical obligation of examining the numerous negative consequences of slavery, segregation, racism, and discrimination (i.e., White supremacy) on the schooling experiences of the study's African American participants. This study was not about the continued real consequences of such injustices on the schooling experiences of African American students (cf. Kozol, 1992) but about how my participants, as revealed through their counterstories of success, demonstrated that they could accommodate, reconfigure, or resist such injustices as an act of ultimate defiance in their pursuit of success.

Critical Theory

In the most general sense, critical theory maintains sociopolitical critiques of social practices and ideology that mask systematically distorted accounts of reality that attempt to conceal and legitimate asymmetric power relations (Bottomore, 1991). Included in these critiques is an examination of how social interests, conflicts, and contradictions are expressed in thought and produced and reproduced in systems of domination (Bottomore, 1991).

Freire (1970/2000b), a contemporary critical theorist, popularized the concept of *conscientização* (critical consciousness)—"learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 35)—which provides a methodology for this study. The goal of Freirian research is to blur the distinctions between research, learning, and action by providing researchers and participants opportunities to collectively engage in the struggle toward social justice (Lather, 1986, 1991). This methodology encourages reciprocity, turning participants into coresearchers while providing the means for researcher's and participants' *self*-empowerment (Lather, 1986, 1991).

Building from a foundation of critical theory, this study began as a "joint search" (Freire, 1969/2000a, p. 45) between me (the researcher) and the participants as we attempted to trouble the discourse of the "achievement gap"[5] problem between Black students and their White counterparts by telling the "other side of the story." This attempt aimed to self-empower me and the participants with deeper understandings of their successes in hopes of motivating *conscientização*. I was engaged in this joint search because I have an allegiance to equity and social justice in U.S. public schools, specifically in the mathematics classroom.

Method

Because I recognized the study's participants as self-empowered, discursively constituted subjects who negotiated the consequences of White supremacy in their pursuit of success, the research methodology I used was, by and large, participative inquiry. Participative inquiry acknowledges both participants and researchers as active subjects. This form of inquiry emphasizes the systematic testing of theory in live-action contexts, resulting in changed lived experiences for all those engaged in the inquiry; the fundamental importance of experiential knowing, acknowledging that people can learn to be, and learn from being, self-reflexive about their world and their lived experiences; and an extended epistemology, suggesting that experiential knowing arises through engagement with others (Reason, 1994).

In particular, I characterize the methodology used as a version of participatory action research, as outlined by Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998). Although they noted "a spiral of self-reflective cycles" (p. 21),[6] which the study did not contain, they also noted six equally important features of participatory action research that were present. Participatory action research is (a) a social process that explores the relationship between persons and the social; (b) a participatory process that engages people in critically examining their senses of identity and agency; (c) a practical and collaborative process that engages people with others in critically examining the actions that link them to one another and to the social; (d) an emancipatory process that aims to assist people in liberating themselves from unjust social structures; (e) a critical process that aims to assist people in liberating themselves from unjust discourses and power relations; and (f) a recursive process that aims to assist people in investigating "reality" in order to change it, in order to reinvestigate it in order to rechange it, and so on (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). These salient features of participatory action research resonate with Freirian research, transforming participants into coresearchers whose contributions blur the distinctions between research, learning, and action.

Participant selection for this study was conducted through a purposive sampling (Silverman, 2000) of five African American men between 20 and 25 years of age. The criteria for sampling included having attended Keeling High School (a pseudonym, as are all proper names throughout) from 9th to 12th grade, having completed at least one mathematics course with me (I taught at Keeling High through the 1995–1996 to 1999–2000 academic years), and having demonstrated achievement and persistence in high school mathematics. Keeling High was an "urban high school located in a suburban community" (according to a description found on the school's Web site), 10 miles from a large city in the South; it was situated in a 95% African American community where the mean home value was $220,000. Keeling High had approximately 1,300 students, with 99% of the students being identified by race or ethnicity as Black by the school system. Although the student population was homogeneous racially, it was very diverse socioeconomically, ranging from the working poor to the middle upper class (44% of the students were eligible to receive

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free or reduced-price lunches). The school provided an embedded mathematics and science magnet program (25% of the students were enrolled in the program) for Newberry County, a large (over 70,000 students) and well-funded school system (i.e., school facilities were modern and well maintained).

The descriptor "demonstrated achievement and persistence in high school mathematics" was met if a participant achieved one or more of the following criteria during his junior or senior year of high school: (a) completed an Advanced Placement calculus or statistics course with a grade of C (70%) or better, (b) completed a joint-enrollment calculus or statistics course with a grade of C (70%) or better, or (c) scored in the fourth quartile (top 25%) of the mathematics portion of the SAT. I invited 16 of my past African American male students (out of approximately 90 who were eligible) by electronic and U.S. postal mail to participate in the study. Six of the 16 students contacted responded to my inquiry, 5 agreed to participate, and 4 completed the study: Ethan, Keegan, Nathaniel, and Spencer. At the time of the study, these four young men were either completing their undergraduate degrees or were in graduate school. (See Table 1 for participant summary and Stinson, 2004, chap. 5, for a detailed description.)

Table 1
Summary of Participants' Description

Participant	Family Background; Socioeconomic Status	High School Extracurricular Activities	Undergraduate Major; Type of School	Current or Future Profession
Ethan	Father, mother, one older brother; middle class	Basketball, football, soccer, and academic clubs and organizations	Mathematics; HBCU	Teacher
Keegan	Father, mother, two older brothers, one younger sister; middle class, transitioned to upper middle class	Academic clubs and organizations	Sociology; HBCU	Preacher
Nathaniel	Father, mother, three younger brothers, and one younger sister; working class, transitioned to middle class	Baseball, cross-country, and academic clubs and organizations	Biochemistry and microbiology; Research I university	Doctor
Spencer	Mother and younger sister; working class, transitioned to middle class	Academic clubs and organizations	Economics; Research I technology university	Lawyer

Note. HBCU = historically Black college or university.

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Data collection included a combination of written artifacts and interviews. In particular, each participant completed a demographic and schooling survey instrument[7] and wrote a brief autobiography and mathematics autobiography.[8] The demographic and schooling survey instrument asked each participant to answer typical questions regarding his primary, secondary, and college schooling years (e.g., schools attended, grade point average achieved, courses completed, honors awarded, test scores earned) and his family demographics (e.g., persons in household, parents' or guardians' education, household income). The autobiography asked each participant to write a brief autobiographical story of his life, highlighting significant events as he progressed through his schooling years. Specifically, it asked each participant to discuss (but not limit himself to) whether he believed that his experiences were unique to being an male African American, any extracurricular activities in which he was involved (either through school or through other civic and community organizations) that he believed contributed to his academic success, any significant person(s) who contributed to his current status in life, and specific learning experiences with his teachers (and college professors). The mathematics autobiography was similarly fashioned but focused specifically on each participant's experiences with mathematics. These artifacts provided basic demographic information and gave the participants an opportunity to express any information they thought to be relevant to the study in written form.

In addition to these artifacts, each participant completed four interviews. These multiple interviews, coupled with the written artifacts, acted as a form of triangulation, providing a number of data sources, which contributed to the trustworthiness of the data (Glesne, 1999). The first interview was an individual, face-to-face, semistructured, traditional question-and-answer interview (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) of about 40 minutes in length, conducted during a 2-hour lunch. In this interview, I attempted to obtain descriptions of the lived worlds of the participants with respect to their interpretations of the meaning of their schooling and mathematics experiences (Kvale, 1996). Sample questions from the first interview included "How did you self-identify in high school and what/who were the factors/individuals that most influenced this identification?" "Was there a relationship between your mathematics experiences and how you self-identified?" "Please identify a peer that you believe is successful"; "Explain why you believe she or he is successful and the experiences that you believe have led to that success"; and "What do you believe would change (if anything) if you were a Black female? White male? Hispanic male? Poor? Wealthy?" This first interview and the previously mentioned artifacts are traditional means of data collection found in most qualitative research studies (see, e.g., Glesne, 1999; Silverman, 2000). It was, in part, within the second, third, and fourth interviews that the participants were encouraged to become coresearchers.

The second and third interviews were also semistructured interviews; both interviews were approximately 1 hour in length and were conducted over the telephone. Prior to each of these interviews, the participants were asked to read, reflect on, and respond to three manuscripts (six manuscripts total)

that discussed specific theoretical perspectives regarding African American children's schooling experiences. The six manuscripts were Ogbu's (1978) book chapter "Black-White Differences in School Performance: A Critique of Current Explanations"; Majors, Tyler, Peden, and Hall's (1994) book chapter "Cool Pose: A Symbolic Mechanism for Masculine Role Enactment and Coping by Black Males"; Steele's (1997) article "A Threat in the Air: How Stereotypes Shape Intellectual Identity and Performance"; Ogbu's (1992) article "Understanding Cultural Diversity and Learning"; Fordham's (1988) article "Racelessness as a Factor in Black Students' School Success: Pragmatic Strategy or Pyrrhic Victory?" and Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) article "Black Students' School Success: Coping With the 'Burden of "Acting White"'" (for a review of these theoretical perspectives, see Stinson, 2006). The specific instructions attached to the copies of the manuscripts were as follows:

> The six manuscripts enclosed are a collection of journal articles and book chapters that represent the prevailing theoretical perspectives available in the discourses about African American children's schooling experiences, and specifically the experiences of African American male students. . . . The purpose of these readings is for you to have the opportunity to read about how some of the major discourses available in education are "re-presenting" African American children, and specifically African American male students. . . . What I am requesting you to do is to read the manuscripts and reflect and comment on those theoretical perspectives (if any) you experienced or felt the need to engage in during your pursuit to be successful in school (and school mathematics). Generally speaking, what I am attempting to uncover through this study is how you negotiated through the structure of public education so successfully. (Participant letter, August 27, 2003)

Through this letter, I again noted the purpose of the study (which was clearly noted in the initial letter requesting participation), attempting to bring the participants further into the study as coresearchers. In making decisions about which theoretical perspectives to have the participants read, I attempted to expose them to literature that discussed the prevailing theoretical perspectives that, I believe, were present in their schooling experiences; they are certainly some of the most prominent perspectives in the literature from the 1990s.

The purpose of engaging the participants in reading the historical and current literature was not to have them confirm or disconfirm the applicability or usefulness of the various theoretical perspectives presented but to provide language for them to express their (and their friends') schooling and life experiences. For practical purposes, the engagement with the literature acted as a catalyst, motivating deeper reflections about their schooling experiences. Developing deeper reflections and understandings of how one functions or operates within a sociocultural and sociohistorical context, by participants and researchers alike, is an important component of participatory action research. In other words, engaging the participants in the literature provided opportunities for the participants to tell their counterstories in response to

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these prevailing (and, I might add, often limiting) theoretical perspectives. Therefore, engaging the participants in the literature did not "corrupt" their responses, as might be perceived by some researchers, but achieved, I believe, an important component of participatory action research.

Moreover, engaging the participants in the literature provided the participants and me with a common vocabulary for our conversations throughout the study. For instance, rather than my trying to interpret from the participants' interview responses whether they engaged in "cool pose" behaviors, the participants were able to explicitly speak about what they believed were cool pose behaviors and whether they had engaged in such behaviors. Sample questions from the second and third interviews included the following:

- As an individual that did identify with school success, and specifically mathematics success, do you believe that Steele's "stereotype threat theory" has ever operated in the decisions that you have made in your pursuit toward success? And if yes, what effect did stereotype threat theory have on your actions?
- Throughout your school success, and specifically your school mathematics success, did you ever believe, feel, think, and so forth that you were choosing between "acting White" or "acting Black"? If yes, what were some of the occasions when you experienced Ogbu's theory of "acting White"? Please provide detailed examples. Or if no, please explain how and why you escaped Ogbu's theory. Or, does Ogbu's theory make any "sense" to you?
- In your pursuit toward school success, and specifically school mathematics success, did you ever believe, feel, think, and so forth as though you were adopting a "raceless persona" as defined by Fordham? Did you believe, feel, think, and so forth as though the structures of school valued some ethnic behaviors over others; that is, did you believe, feel, think, and so forth as though the structures of school rewarded "White behaviors" over "Black behaviors"? And what does the characterization of White and Black behaviors mean to you?

The fourth interview was a face-to-face interview using a narrative approach, asking the participants to summarize their schooling and mathematics experiences, which required me to be a good listener and the interviewees (i.e., the participants) to be storytellers rather than respondents (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). The research questions of the study, however, were used as a catalyst for the conversation (earlier drafts of the rationale and theoretical chapters of my dissertation had been mailed to the participants for their review prior to the fourth interview). This interview, also conducted during a 2-hour lunch, was approximately 40 minutes in length. The focus of the fourth interview was not only a continuation of the retrospective counter-storytelling of the participants' schooling and mathematics experiences but also their reflections as research participants and on the research process. In effect, the fourth interview disclosed how the research process changed (or not) their thinking and reflections regarding their schooling experiences and the possibilities of their future experiences.

In addition to the data collection procedures noted, I made several other attempts to bring the participants into the study in hopes of transforming them into active coresearchers. For example, I sent detailed letters by e-mail approximately twice a month updating the participants as to the progress of the study and had numerous telephone conversations with the participants throughout the study (some conversations related to the study and some did not). The participants also read the data analysis portion of the study, engaging them in member checking (Glesne, 1999).

In total, the data collection procedures spanned a 6-month time period, requiring approximately 30 to 40 hours of each participant's time (e.g., completing the demographic survey, writing biographies, reading manuscripts, participating in interview and telephone conversations, responding to e-mails). Throughout the data collection procedures (and analyzing and writing up the data), I monitored—not exorcised—my researcher subjectivity, in hopes of developing what Peshkin (1988) called an illuminating, empowering, and personal understanding and awareness of subjectivity that attuned me to where self and study were intertwined. I used this understanding and awareness to build accepting and trusting rapport with the participants (Glesne, 1999). A positive rapport with participants, together with awareness of subjectivity, led to an intersubjectivity with the participants that assisted in shaping and enriching the study (Glesne, 1999). This intersubjectivity, coupled with triangulation and member checking, I believe, strengthened the overall validity and reliability of the study's findings.

Findings

The following discussion is a focused critical postmodern theoretical analysis of the participants' data; it is not a presentation of their data. I do, however, provide some extracted direct quotations—representing "power in reserve" (Geertz, cited in Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, & St. Pierre, 2007, p. 28)—from the participants' data throughout the discussion to support the analysis. In other words, the extracted quotations are an attempt to represent a collective consciousness of the participants. In making such a data presentation decision, I do not intend to suggest that the participants spoke from a single monolithic "voice"—they were never monolithic—but to suggest that, for the current purposes of this article, the extracted quotations provided support the theoretical analysis.

Counter-Storytelling of Success

The different voices of the participants were readily observed as they told their counterstories of success. When explicitly asked, "How do you define societal success?" the participants' general responses were as helping others by effecting positive change (Ethan); as affecting people's lives by being a just testament (Keegan); as achieving what one desires by excelling past one's goals (Nathaniel); or, simply, as living a happy life by caring for

loved ones (Spencer). The difference in how the participants defined success, either in broad social terms or in terms of narrow human needs and desires, may have reflected their financial situations. Ethan and Keegan had been immersed in the comforts of the middle to upper middle class, whereas Nathaniel and Spencer had experienced less than comfortable middle-class economic conditions, transitioning from working class to middle class through their schooling years. In other words, it is easier for one to think of success in broad social terms when one has never feared a shortage of basic human needs. Nonetheless, no matter how the participants conceptualized success, implicitly or explicitly stated throughout their conversations was the undisputed need for education, whether it was to pass knowledge on or to ensure that one could financially care for loved ones. The valuing of or need for education, specifically formal education, was a common theme found throughout the participants' counter-storytelling as they discussed success.

Many external and internal sociocultural factors identified by the participants contributed to their valuing of education, which ultimately resulted in their success. The factors identified were extreme, ranging from the external force of God to the internal force of self-motivation, with the force of fear—fear of disappointing family and community members—somewhere in between. When asked to describe what factors, events, organizations, or individuals led them to be successful, there were four clear factors that resonated in the conversations of all four participants: (a) observing or knowing family or community members who had benefited from formal education by achieving financial and societal success, (b) experiencing encouraging and forceful family and community members who made the expectations of academic (and mathematics) success explicit, (c) encountering caring and committed teachers and school personnel who established high academic expectations for students in general and developed relationships with students that reached beyond the school and academics, and (d) associating with high-achieving peer-group members who had similar goals and interests. These four factors have been previously reported as influential in the schooling success of minority students (e.g., see Berry, 2005; Hébert & Reis, 1999; Martin, 2000; Moody, 2000; O'Connor, 1997; Walker, 2006).

Observing or knowing family or community members who had benefited from formal education was instrumental to the participants' valuing of education. The life experiences of these individuals from their inner circles of family and community members provided the participants with proof that there was a "pay-off" to education and with determination that they too could succeed. Knowing and seeing other African Americans who had succeeded provided the participants with tangible evidence of the value of working toward academic success. Spencer, for example, mentioned how his mother's completing her undergraduate degree had improved the family's financial situation. Nathaniel said, "I got a sense [from my parents] that learning was something important, it was something that . . . put food on our plate, and eventually led us to moving up in social standing."

Not only did these individuals from their inner circles provide the participants with tangible evidence of the value of a sound education, but they

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also made the expectations of success explicit. These explicit expectations of success loudly reverberated through each participant's counterstory. The participants were constantly surrounded by family and community members who were not "too shy to remind" (Keegan) them about the expectations of school and academic success, and success in general.

Expectations of success were established not only by family and community members but also by teachers and school personnel. The participants discussed significant encounters with several caring and committed teachers and school personnel who established high academic expectations for students and developed relationships with students that reached beyond the school and academics. Educators who established high academic expectations for students were credited with giving "me that motivation to achieve" (Keegan) and "90% of my educational development" (Spencer). And educators who developed relationships with students that reached beyond the school and academics were credited with compelling "them to want to learn" (Ethan) and "engaging [them] in other things . . . where you develop a trust" (Keegan). Within the context of schools, there was no other single factor identified throughout the participants' conversations that matched the impact[9] on success of the positive encounters with caring and committed educators who established high academic expectations and developed student relationships that went beyond the school and academics (see Ladson-Billings, 1994, for a discussion of caring and committed teachers and African American students).

Likewise, in the context of schools, associating with high-achieving peer-group members who had similar goals and interests provided the participants with interactive, academically supportive peer groups that positively affected their success. The participants noted, "When I was in honors courses there were other [African Americans] who were interested in [academics]" (Keegan), and "when it came to academic success . . . at Keeling High we were pretty much competitive . . . [not] necessarily competitive against mainstream; we were competitive against each other" (Ethan). This academically competitive, high-achieving peer group provided daily, interactive reminders that being an academically successful student and an African American student were not contradictory identities.

Negotiating the "White Male Math Myth" Discourse

In their larger efforts for academic success, the participants had incorporated a positive mathematics identity (Martin, 2000), in effect negotiating the "White male math myth" discourse. The participants' beliefs about their mathematics abilities, however, were as different as the participants themselves. For instance, they defined their mathematics abilities as something very natural, "like eating or talking" (Ethan); or as learning "ways of maneuvering through mathematics" (Keegan); or as "something I had to work at . . . I got better at it because I kept working at it" (Nathaniel; Spencer echoed this sentiment). The participants all held strong beliefs about the instrumental importance of mathematics, perceiving "mathematics as something that

was very important and necessary for success" (Keegan). And either implicitly or explicitly, each participant remarked that mathematics was "the backbone of a lot of things" (Nathaniel), claiming that knowledge in mathematics helped one to "know a little more about what somebody else is saying" (Nathaniel). The participants believed that their opportunities to learn mathematics were unbounded, given that they perceived the learning of mathematics "as the same whether you are Black, White, Asian, young or old . . . [something that] everyone can learn . . . because of its very nature" (Spencer). Furthermore, because each of the participants perceived mathematics as "very important and necessary for success" (Keegan), they were motivated to "work harder because the [advanced] classes were harder" (Nathaniel), leading them to achieve advanced mathematics knowledge.

Throughout the participants' conversations about mathematics, it is important to note that, either directly or indirectly, each participant perceived mathematics as being somewhat "culturally free" (e.g., "the same whether you are Black, White, Asian, young or old"). How the participants developed such a perspective was not explored per se. I inferred from their conversations, however, that, although each participant expanded the utility of mathematics beyond mere school mathematics, the four participants also viewed success in school mathematics as just one component in their larger efforts toward success. For instance, Ethan's statement "I was always . . . willing to learn . . . what I needed to do to achieve, and if the core curriculum [which included mathematics] was what they needed me to do, I was willing to do it," typifies the participants' positioning of success in mathematics within their overall efforts toward success. In short, each participant, like Martin's (2000) mathematically successful African American students, incorporated a positive mathematics identity within his overall academic success. These positive mathematics (and academic) identities, however, are most often seen as uncharacteristic of African American male students given that discussions about African American male students who embrace mathematics (and academics in general) are rarely, if ever, located in sociocultural discourses or the research literature. How each participant acquired such an "uncharacteristic" mathematics identity—successfully negotiating the "White male math myth"—I argue is to be found in part in how he understood sociocultural discourses of U.S. society in general and how he negotiated the specific discourses that surround African American men.

Negotiating Sociocultural Discourses

Throughout the participants' counterstories of success, it became apparent that the participants were keenly aware of the sociocultural discourses present in U.S. society and how they operated, and that most operated inequitably. Collectively, although the participants did not use the vocabulary of poststructural theory, CRT, or critical theory, they were clearly speaking the language of these theories as they provided their perspectives on the discourses of U.S. society and throughout their conversations in general. In

the following discussion, I weave together various concepts from these three theoretical frameworks. The aim of the discussion is to illustrate how I used theory as a way to honor the data (St. Pierre, 1997a). By using an eclectic array of concepts from these three frameworks side by side, the participants' counterstories are analyzed not as stories of how they "overcame" unjust sociocultural discourses but as stories of how successful African American male students accommodate, resist, or even reconfigure negative sociocultural discourses as they embrace those discourses that are positive.

Discourse of the Male African American

As previously noted, the study began, theoretically, with African American male students characterized as discursive subjects who negotiated (consciously or not) sociocultural discourses regarding male African Americans. This theoretical shift, borrowed from poststructural theory, characterizes the person not as an individual whose life experiences have formed the basis of his or her knowledge and actions but rather as a discursive formation who can explain his or her experiences only through the discourses that are made available to him or her (Scott, 1992). Thus, it becomes the available discourses that form the basis of the subject's knowledge and actions rather than the life experiences in and of themselves. Foucault (1969/1972) claimed that discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (p. 49); consequently, "one remains within the dimension of discourse" (p. 76). He, however, and most important, joined power and knowledge through discourse, identifying discourse both as an "effect of power" and as providing "a point of resistance" (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 101). This poststructural redefining of discourse allows for the understanding of "how knowledge, truth, and subjects are produced in language and cultural practice as well as how they might be reconfigured" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 486).

The understanding that the image of the male African American had been constructed through discursive formations and cultural practices was evident in the striking similarities in the participants' conversations as they spoke about the *constructed* African American male adolescent. The image that was painted, in part, by all four participants was the jewelry-donned, baggy-clothed, player "thug" who projected a nonchalant attitude toward school and academics. The participants noted that the reproduction and perpetuation of this discursive image was due to one of the nation's "biggest 'cash cows,' television" (Ethan): "If you watch television, if you look at the news, you don't tend to see Black men in a positive role" (Ethan). The discourse of the thug was so prominent that Keegan noted that even he had fallen prey to it when mentoring "troubling" young Black boys: "I'm even guilty of it . . . when [Black boys] are not performing as well, if they are acting bad and not really doing well in school you say, 'Oh Lord, this going to be a thug . . . I can't help them.'"

The participants identified the discourse of female African Americans as smarter than male African Americans as another prominent and negative consequential discourse: "For African American males, when they come out of

the womb they are already stereotyped; it is stereotypical for a Black female to be smarter than a Black male. That is just a stereotype that we are given" (Ethan). The consequence of this stereotypical discourse that "a Black female . . . [is] smarter than a Black male" (Ethan) results in lower school and academic expectations for African American male students, lowered by teachers, and most important, it was argued by the participants, lowered by the African American community in general.

Discourse of White and Black

Ethan's comment that "society has decided that we want White behaviors and Black behaviors" exemplifies the participants' understanding that cultural markers such as White and Black behaviors, or the thug, were mere constructions, preserved and perpetuated by institutions, such as the media. Understanding that what many take as "real" is only a construction allows a discursively constituted subject the ability to decode and recode his or her identity. In fact, Keegan argued, "Stereotypes uplift me. When someone says, 'I'm not as smart as another culture' or 'I'm not as bright,' I laugh that in their face . . . they are not talking about me." Butler (1990/1999) identified the subject's ability to decode and recode its identity in a rebellious manner (or not) as "subversive repetition" (p. 32). Subversive repetition, a concept borrowed from poststructural theory, conveys that even though the subject is subjected to repeating oneself through the available discourses, the discourses themselves are open to intervention and resignification. For instance, Keegan noted, "To be successful in society you don't have to get rid of your Blackness, but you can be successful by doing this, doing *a*, doing *b*, doing *c*." Although the participants subverted the negative discursive formation of the male African American, their collective counter-storytelling illustrates that the discourse had a negative impact on their pursuits of success, in that it was a discursive formation that required continuous negotiation.

Ethan's comment about "White and Black behaviors" also exemplifies the participants' understanding of sociocultural and sociohistorical binaries and how these binaries act to "name" marginalized subjects, a concept borrowed from critical theory. A marginalized subject can be identified as any person on the right side of binaries such as White-Black (or non-White), male-female, rich-poor, educated-noneducated, and so on. There is nothing "real" about these binary features, no biological or "scientific" explanation for which side of these binaries came to be privileged. But then again, these are very real features, in that they are culturally and historically situated and constructed features located within societal discourses that assist in dividing and differentiating subjects, often leading to unjust social practices.[10] Clearly, subjects live at intersections of these binaries; therefore, which binary feature is most significant to a person at any given moment depends on the context in which the person is located.

Poststructural theory provides a means for deconstructing these binary oppositions through Derrida's (1974/1997) deconstruction of language and cultural practices. The deconstruction of binaries identifies the first term, that

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is, the "privileged" term, as being dependent on its identity by the exclusion of the other term, demonstrating that, in reality, primacy belongs to the second term, that is, the subordinate term (Sarup, 1993). The first move in deconstruction, then, is to overthrow the privileged term with the other term, displacing this term—now the first term—by putting it under erasure,[11] revealing what was always already present (Spivak, 1974/1997). Keegan demonstrated an understanding of deconstruction, stating, "I could be Black and successful . . . just because I am wearing a suit, or I don't have an earring in my ear, or . . . a tattoo, does not mean that I am trying to appear White." Keegan's comment is an acknowledgment that the world has been constructed through language and cultural practices; consequently, it can be deconstructed and reconstructed again and again (St. Pierre, 2000).

Earlier, when I stated that different binary features lead to injustices, I did not intend to suggest that the injustices that different marginalized subjects experience are equivalent; I understand that they are different. There is, however, a commonality in these binary identity labels, in that marginalized racial, ethnic, and cultural groups are often oppressed within sociocultural discourses that have been designed and maintained by people who recognize only "one universal subject of history—the white, Anglo, heterosexual male of bourgeois privilege" (McLaren, cited in Torres, 1998, p. 178). The maintenance of this universally acclaimed subject results in hegemony, a concept borrowed from critical theory.

Hegemony is the manner in which imposed ideology warrants the reproduction of social and institutional practices and discourses that enable dominant groups to not only maintain their positions of power and privilege but also have consensual support from the "Others" (Leistyna et al., 1996). For instance, Ethan's statement exemplifies the power of hegemonic discourses: "You must instill into your child, or to yourself, the values of the middle-class, upper-class White values, because that is the only way you are going to survive." Keegan, on the other hand, equated adhering to hegemonic discourses as playing a game: "Sometimes, I believe to be successful you have to play the game. I don't want to call it a game, but you have to know what you are doing."

The participants' understanding of how to work within and against hegemonic discourses illustrates a "double-consciousness"[12] (Du Bois, 1903/1989, p. 3), a concept I position within CRT. As Nathaniel said, "Being a Black male . . . going into a store with your book bag, your sort of want to ease people's fears, . . . so . . . you may say, 'Can I put my bag over here?'" Double-consciousness allows those who have been marginalized to see and understand positions of inclusion and exclusion—margins and mainstreams—and applies not only to African Americans but to any people who are constructed outside of the dominant discourses (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Those who are constructed outside of the dominant discourses and have developed, consciously (or not), a double-consciousness, I argue, are motivated toward self-empowerment and social transformation.

Critical theorists, in general, contend that an examination of hegemonic systems of domination brings about an awakening of consciousness and

awareness of social injustices, motivating self-empowerment and social trans-formation (see, e.g., Freire, 1970/2000). Spencer demonstrated his self-empowerment as he spoke about being in a classroom in which he is one of a few (if not the only) African American male students: "I make sure that I raise my hand to answer the questions early . . . I try to prove my worth, show that I belong." Actions such as Spencer's were plentiful throughout the participants' counter-storytelling, illustrating that the participants were con-tinuously working within and against the discursive image of the male African American. Coupled with their self-empowerment was a sense of social transformation, a belief that social change is possible by working within and against hegemonic discourses. Ethan argued, "We must make somebody uncomfortable at the top; we must not only make them uncom-fortable, but we must educate them on why things must change."

The participants' desire to change current sociocultural discourses, such as the injustices of racism, however, never stood as an obstacle to their suc-cess. In other words, they understood the permanency of racial injustices not as a sign of submission but as an act of ultimate defiance. Nathaniel claimed that the dismantling of affirmative action would limit opportunities for African Americans, making it "a little bit harder for African Americans to do what their parents did . . . say a generation ago." Similarly, Ethan practically shrugged off racial injustices:

> So what can I say, it was tougher because a lot of the options and opportunities, facilities and things that Caucasians have, we don't have . . . but . . . as an African American male you have got to do what you need to do.

The participants' collective counter-storytelling around self-empowerment and social transformation, however, required a retheorizing of power in gen-eral. Poststructural theory provides such a retheorizing. Power in a poststruc-tural frame is not an object that can be shared, deployed, or taken away but is a dynamic and productive event that exists in *relations* (Foucault, 1976/1990). Foucault (1976/1990) claimed that power relations are dependent on a "multiplicity of points of resistance," arguing that "there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. . . . Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case" (pp. 95–96). In other words, in a Foucauldian conceptualization of power, revolution—or refusal—can be achieved not only by the united actions of working men from all countries (Marx & Engels, 1848/1978) but also, and more important, by the solitary actions of the discursively constituted subject—even the solitary action of raising one's hand early in the semester.

Discourses of Deficiency and Rejection

Not only did the participants negotiate the hegemonic discursively constituted image of the African American male adolescent but also various

theoretical perspectives that I positioned in one of two categories: the discourse of deficiency or the discourse of rejection. (For a detailed discussion of these discourses, see Stinson, 2006.)

Discourse of deficiency. The discourse of deficiency focuses on the perceived deficient cultural, schooling, and life experiences of Black children. Ogbu (1978; see also Ogbu, 2003) provided a historical summary and critique of theoretical perspectives that attempted to explain the lower academic achievement of Black students, specifically the Black-White achievement gap. I located these theories in the discourse of deficiency: The *cultural deprivation theory* claims that Black children come from home and neighborhood environments that are somehow culturally disadvantaged; the *culture conflict theory* claims that Black communities fail to equip Black children with the White, middle-class skills necessary for school success and that schools fail to fully use the unique experiences of Black children; the *institutional deficiency theory* claims that the very institution of school is organized to favor middle- and upper-class, nonminority children; the *educational equality theory* claims that the schooling opportunities and experiences for Black children are not equal; and the *heredity theory* claims that Black children have inferior genetic endowments for intellectual work. The participants' counterstories regarding the discourse of deficiency were in response to a prompt after reading Ogbu's (1978) summary and critique, which asked, "Please comment as to whether you or your classmates had experiences in schools that, you believe, resulted from the theories Ogbu summarized and critiqued, and specifically in your or their mathematics schooling experiences."

The participants most often reconfigured the discourses of deficiency, arguing that these theories related to the socioeconomic status of students or to a different era. Specifically, both the cultural deprivation theory and culture conflict theory were most often reconfigured as relating to the socioeconomic status of students, not to the race or ethnicity of students: "Because Keeling [High School] was made up of vast socioeconomic status . . . a lot of the mainstream cultural aspects were still there" (Ethan). Even when the cultural deprivation theory was acknowledged as being applicable, or was accommodated, a caveat was offered so as not to overplay the theory, or an argument was provided stating that the deprivation (or conflict) could be overcome: "I believe that [being in] a strong school environment . . . that some of those [cultural] things could be overcome" (Spencer). The institutional deficiency theory and educational equality theory were most often reconfigured as meaningful only in a different era: "With the state of our schools [today], we are definitely improving in the types of educational access that is available to people" (Spencer).

When accommodated, these theories were accompanied by an argument that one could succeed in spite of the structural deficiency or inequities through personal drive: "One of my best friends went to one of the worst public schools . . . but she had a personal drive about herself. She ended up going to Princeton . . . and now she is in graduate school at Stanford"

(Keegan). And the heredity theory was clearly resisted as participants either provided anecdotes that refuted the theory or declarations of contempt for the theory: "I think that it is still sad that we are dealing with those . . . thoughts . . . that African Americans are inferior genetically, which I think is just stupid" (Keegan).

As the participants most often reconfigured or resisted the discourse of deficiency, there are three specific aspects of their collective schooling experiences that must be highlighted. First, each of the participants attended public schools, K–12, located in well-funded county school systems in a very "race-sensitive" city, and in most instances, African American students were the clear majority in their schooling experiences (since the mid-1980s, however, many African American students have attended schools in which they are the majority, as public schools across the nation have become increasingly resegregated [Frankenberg & Lee, 2002]). Therefore, as a result of the politics of the city, the physical facilities of the schools they attended, on the surface, were equitably funded and well maintained, and conflicts, problems, and so forth due to the "race" of the students were minimal. Second, each of the participants had been tracked into honors programs early in his education, providing him with access to enriched schooling experiences and academic programs and access to the most credentialed and experienced teachers. And third, the family wealth present at their high school, which was embedded in an affluent African American community, and experienced somewhat by all of the participants, provided the participants with what could be argued as atypical schooling experiences for African American students (cf. Kozol, 1992). Nevertheless, the collective schooling experiences of these four African American male students demonstrate the possible outcomes of African American students when they are, indeed, provided access to well-funded schools, challenging curricula, and highly qualified teachers (cf. Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Discourse of rejection. The discourse of rejection broadly focuses on the systematic rejection[13] of school and academics by African American students or on the systematic rejection of culture-specific "Black behaviors" by African American students. Both forms of rejection are argued to be coping strategies used by African Americans in managing the negative effects of racism and discrimination. In particular, the participants responded to readings regarding five prevailing theories—three theories that explore the rejection of schooling and academics: Majors and Billson's *cool pose theory* (Majors et al., 1994; see also Majors & Billson, 1993), Steele's (1997) *stereotype threat theory* (see also Steele 1999, 2003), and Ogbu's (1992) *cultural-ecological theory* (see also Ogbu, 2003)—and two theories that explore the rejection of Black behaviors: Fordham's (1988) *raceless persona theory* (see also Fordham, 1996) and Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) *burden of "acting White" theory.*

Majors and Billson's (1993) cool pose theory suggests that some male African Americans develop ritualized forms of masculinity that allow them to cope and survive in an environment of oppression and racism. Specifically, cool pose "entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management,

and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control" (p. 4); it is often manifested in culturally specific demeanors, gestures, stances, walks, handshakes, and so on, and through culturally specific clothing, hair, and other "fashion" styles. These ritualized forms are often perceived as being in opposition to school success. The discourse of cool pose was reconfigured by the participants as they developed strategies, such as shedding, or subverting the subversion, that allowed engagement in cool pose behaviors in social settings while limiting the negative impact on their school and academic success:

> Once I came into the classroom, I would sort of shed those cool pose behaviors and adopt a more traditional educational behavior . . . those things [I did in the hallways] weren't necessarily brought into the classroom . . . they were two different environments. (Spencer)

Steele's (1997) stereotype threat theory centers on how societal stereotypes about specific groups "can influence the intellectual functioning and identity development of individual group members" (p. 613). The theory claims that African American students participate in "disidentification" (p. 614) with schooling because of the threat of confirming the negative stereotype regarding the intellectual capabilities of African Americans. This discourse was reconfigured by some participants and accommodated by others. Those who reconfigured the discourse argued that it acted as "propulsion" or "motivation" to achieve (Ethan) to prove the stereotype wrong. Those who accommodated the discourse developed strategies that demonstrated that they "deserved to be there," that they did "belong" (Spencer).

Ogbu's (1992) cultural-ecological theory asserts that the American caste system, which is racially stratified, contributes to the academic underachievement of specific racial minorities in U.S. schools. One key component of this theory is the notion of "cultural inversion" (p. 8), which is the rejection of certain forms of behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings by involuntary minorities (i.e., minorities who were brought to the United States against their will or who had been conquered or colonized) because they are characterized as White. This characterization results in involuntary minorities' adopting cultural behaviors, events, and so forth, that are often in opposition to the dominant White culture. Another key component is "acting White" (p. 10), which is when involuntary minorities must choose between adopting "appropriate" attitudes and behaviors that are consistent with school rules and standard practices that are perceived and interpreted by minority students as typical of White students and adopting attitudes and behaviors that the minority students consider appropriate for their racial or ethnic groups but that are not necessarily conducive to school success.

In general, the participants most often resisted the discourse of cultural inversion, arguing that it "didn't necessarily apply" (Ethan) or "never . . . was very real in . . . life" (Keegan). And when the discourse was accommodated, like the discourse of cool pose, the cultural inversion behaviors were

effectively managed by relegating them to the hallways and other out-of-classroom venues so as to limit the negative impact on school and academic success. The discourse of acting White was resisted, as it was argued that the term *nerd* could be applied to all races, "to the Black community, to the White community, to Asians, whatever" (Nathaniel). The discourse was accommodated, however, as the concept of acting White was often applied to other "White" things, such as White dress, White English, White music, and so forth, an accommodation also noted by Bergin and Cooks (2002; see also Horvat & O'Connor, 2006).

Fordham's (1988) raceless persona theory contends that African American students who achieve school and academic success are often conflicted, feeling the need to reject their racial and cultural identity in the process of achieving school and academic success. Fordham set forth her theory by borrowing the anthropological concept *fictive kinship*, defined as "a kinship-like connection between and among persons in a society, not related by blood or marriage, who have maintained essential reciprocal social or economic relationships" (p. 56). She suggested that fictive kinship within the African American community is a learned cultural symbol that denotes a Black collective identity, resulting in community terms such as "brother," "sister," and "blood." Similar to Ogbu's (1992) cultural-ecological theory, Fordham claimed that members of the Black collective identity develop cultural norms that are often oppositional to the norms of White America. This discourse was most often resisted, with one exception, as the participants troubled a Black collective void of success given that the participants had parents, family and community members, and teachers who explicitly made the concept of success colorless: "My ignorance [that success was perceived as having a color] allowed me to not necessarily take on a raceless persona, but to keep my ethnicity, to not necessarily feel educational success was a color" (Ethan). In contrast, Keegan accommodated the discourse noting that in his earlier schooling he experienced a raceless persona: "I felt raceless, felt like success was sometimes being outside the race I guess, not being Black enough." The racelessness experienced by Keegan, however, began to fade after he was placed in the honors program in middle school, which resulted in being surrounded by other African American students who had similar interests.

Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) burden of acting White theory is a coupling and extension of Fordham's fictive kinship and Ogbu's acting White. This theory attempts to explain how African American students who are high achievers or perform satisfactorily, although well below their potential (i.e., underachievers), in schools manage the burden of acting White. Given that the participants did not perceive academic success as White, for the most part, they resisted this discourse: "Because I was surrounded by so many African Americans who actually wanted to achieve, the burden of acting White was not necessarily there . . . none of us saw success as Black or White; we saw it as being successful period" (Ethan). Nevertheless, a burden of acting uncool was present in the participants' experiences, in effect reconfiguring the

discourse: "Because you are making certain types of grades [peers] may try to belittle you. But I guess to be accepted in any group, you have to show them otherwise, that hey, 'I am smart, but . . . I am still cool'" (Nathaniel).

Impact of the Study on Participants

An important feature of participatory action research is a recursive process that aims to assist people in investigating "reality" in order to change it, in order to reinvestigate it in order to rechange it, and so on (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). Mindful of this feature, during the last interview, I asked each participant roughly the same sequence of closing questions: "As you think about your engagement in this research study for the past 6 months, which included writing biographies, reading manuscripts, participating in interviews, and so forth, how has the research study assisted you in reconceptualizing how you function or operate in society?" "How has your engagement in this research study impacted how you think about your experiences in high school, in college, and now in graduate school?" "How has your engagement in this research study impacted how you might function or operate in the future?" and "In other words, what have you gained (if anything) from being engaged in this research study?" The purpose of this sequence of questions was to determine if the participants' engagement in the study might have long-term transformative effects.

Ethan claimed that by engaging in the research study, he became aware that it was "unfair that minorities are being taught what the majority feels is important, or that they are being taught what the mainstream wants them to be taught." He noted that he now understood that there were many aspects of education that must be explored when educating minorities, and the majority who "are in control of the school system." As a mathematics teacher in an urban high school, Ethan believed that his engagement in the study assisted him in understanding the complexities of teaching and learning: "As an educator you must take into consideration every level, every aspect of learning of a student, and if you don't then that student will never achieve, and you can always hold yourself responsible."

Keegan claimed that he found the study and his engagement in it useful and important, stating, "There is not enough literature written about those who have succeeded; it is easier to write about those who have failed and the reason why they have failed." He said that his engagement in the study caused him to think back and reexamine many aspects of his life: "The [manuscripts] that I read caused me to examine how I look at myself, even now in higher education and how I viewed myself throughout my academic career, beginning all the way back to elementary school."

Nathaniel simply stated that engaging in the research study gave him a further appreciation for the research process and those who do research. He drew a comparison between my passions for the study and his experiences in science labs as an undergraduate student, acknowledging that researchers are individuals who have "devoted their lives to some discipline, [but] who are not necessarily getting paid a lot."

Spencer noted that the study was a "good start" of telling the other side of the story: the other side of the "achievement-gap story." He characterized the study "as a reverse engineering kind of thing," suggesting that it made more sense to examine some success stories and determine what could be learned from those students. He believed that applying successful African American students' schooling experiences to the larger minority population could make "success stories more the norm as opposed to statistical outliners." Although Spencer acknowledged that his initial engagement in the study was done out of a "sense of responsibility," he stated that as time passed he began to take a "more . . . proactive kind of view . . . because [it] is valuable research." He hoped that he could "be some very small and insignificant part of a big large solution." Spencer argued that the addition of some success stories regarding African American male students and academics to the literature might begin to change some opinions: "I have had so much interest in the study because this is something that affects me as an African American male. It is going to affect my sons, my nephews, and my grandsons."

The collective closing comments of the participants illustrate that their engagement in the research study made available different understandings of their schooling and life experiences as the participants began to locate their experiences in the sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts in which they were produced, developed, and evolved (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). These different understandings motivated deeper reflection on their past experiences and, I suppose, deeper reflection on their ability to transform their future experiences (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998).

Summary and Discussion

This study grew out of my 5-year experience as a White mathematics teacher in a Black high school. This experience afforded me the opportunity to be exposed to many African American male (and female) students who excelled in school mathematics. Through this exposure, I became puzzled by the scarcity of education literature that focuses on African American students who achieve and persist in mathematics, given the abundance of literature that has focused on African American students who appear to reject mathematics. In other words, where were the success stories of African American students? In particular, where were the success stories of African American male students? It just didn't add up (Ladson-Billings, 1997). My students demonstrated not only achievement and persistence in mathematics but also success in school and academics in general. My desire to understand how my African American male students, in particular, might have incorporated a positive mathematics identity within their larger efforts toward success led to a broader examination of their schooling experiences, extending beyond their experiences in the mathematics classroom. Through this broad examination, I wanted to determine how my African American male students defined success and to what sociocultural factors they attributed their success. Specifically, given that they were achieving in ways that were counter to the literature and prevailing societal discourses, I

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wanted to understand how sociocultural discourses about male African Americans shaped their perceptions of themselves as mathematics learners and as African American students, and how they negotiated such discourses.

As I began the study, I examined many different theoretical frameworks available to social scientists that might frame the study, attempting to understand not only the methodological implications of each framework but also its philosophical foundations. It was imperative that the theoretical framework(s) provide the scholarly language to articulate how I understand the world and ethical methodological possibilities to conduct research on/with the "Other" (Crotty, 1998). I concluded that no single framework quite satisfied both requirements, leading me to piece together an eclectic theoretical framework. In effect, I borrowed theoretical concepts and methodological processes from poststructural theory, CRT, and critical theory that I used side by side while conducting the study.

Theoretically, poststructural theory made available a different language to *re*define terms such as *person*, *agency*, *discourse*, and *power*, as well as the theoretical concepts of *subversive repetition* and *deconstruction*. CRT offered a means of foregrounding race and racism throughout the study, as well as the theoretical concepts of *counter-storytelling* and *double-consciousness*. Critical theory put forward the ideological foundation of sociopolitical critique, self-empowerment, and social transformation, as well as the theoretical concepts of *marginalized subjects* and *hegemony*. In short, Foucault's (1969/1972) discursive formation and Butler's (1990/1999) subversive repetition provided the Du Boisian (1903/1989) doubled-conscious subject being framed; Bell's (1992) ultimate defiance of racism provided the matting; and last, Freire's (1970/2000) *conscientização* provided the frame.

Methodologically, the study began with the goal of doing research *with* rather than *on* the study's participants. Participative inquiry, with its emphasis on testing theory, experiential knowing, and engagement with others, aligned with this goal and the eclectic theoretical framework. In general, poststructural theory offered an analytical means of honoring the participants' counterstories by applying theory to the participants' data rather than waiting for theory to "emerge" from the data. CRT established research value in the participants' counterstories of success, whereas critical theory motivated a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and participants, asking the participants to become coresearchers, as both the researcher and participants jointly troubled the "achievement-gap problem" by telling the "other side of the story."

In short, applying an eclectic array of theoretical concepts and methodological processes to the participants' counterstories illustrates the complexities of how particular sociocultural discourses affected their agency as they negotiated those discourses in their pursuit of success. This eclectic array, I believe, frees the participants' counterstories from being essentialized to the often simply told Horatio Alger Jr. story—"Oh, look how these young Black men overcame society's racial injustices and became successful, pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps"—to stories that more respectfully and accurately explain how these young men achieved success.

Within this eclectic array, the participants' counterstories revealed that they defined success either in broad social terms or in terms of narrow human needs and desires. But no matter how the participants defined success, implicit or explicit in their definitions was the valuing of or need for education. Although the participants attributed a wide variety of sociocultural factors to their success, four factors were identified by all four: (a) observing or knowing family or community members who had benefited from formal education by achieving financial and societal success; (b) experiencing encouraging and forceful family and community members who made the expectations of academic, and mathematics, success explicit; (c) encountering caring and committed teachers and school personnel who established high academic expectations for students and developed relationships with students that reached beyond the school and academics; and (d) associating with high-achieving peer-group members who had similar goals and interests. Given that these factors have been documented elsewhere as influential to the schooling success of Black children, how can colleges and schools of education, pre-K–12 schools, and Black communities in general work together to ensure that these factors are present in the lived experiences of all Black children? And more generally, what larger sociopolitical discourses need to be critically examined and transformed to ensure that these factors are present in the lived experiences of every child?

In the participants' specific conversations regarding their mathematics success, each revealed a robust mathematics identity. Effectively, the four participants held strong beliefs about the instrumental importance of mathematics, extending the utility of mathematics beyond mere school mathematics into their daily lives and chosen professions (i.e., teacher, preacher, doctor, and lawyer). The participants believed that their opportunities and constraints to learn mathematics were unbounded, given that mathematics was perceived as a culturally free discipline. Furthermore, each of the participants was motivated to take advanced mathematics courses, resulting in advanced mathematics knowledge. How the participants acquired such "uncharacteristic" mathematics identities for African American male students, successfully negotiating the "White male math myth," was found in part in how they understood the sociocultural discourses of U.S. society in general and how they accommodated, reconfigured, or resisted the specific discourses that surround African American men.

The discursive image that was painted of the African American male adolescent, in part, by all four participants, as a result of the available discourses, was the jewelry-donned, baggy-clothed, player thug who projected a nonchalant attitude toward school and academics. This image, coupled with the stereotypical discourse that projects female African Americans as smarter than male African Americans, results in lower school and academic expectations for African American male students, lowered by teachers and the African American community in general. The participants' ability to negotiate (consciously or not) this discursive image was instrumental in their pursuit of success. Their counterstories demonstrate that they were indeed

successful in negotiating this discourse; however, the mere presence of this negative consequential discursive image begs several questions. For instance, How did this discursive image get its start? Who benefits from the (re)production of this discursive image? How are teachers, schools, and society in general implicated in reifying (unconsciously or not) this discursive image? What might the schooling outcomes of African American male students be if they did not have to expend so much energy (intellectually and physically) on negotiating this discursive image?

The participants negotiated not only the discursive image of male African Americans but also the discourses of deficiency and rejection. The participants most often reconfigured theories located in the discourse of deficiency as relating to the socioeconomic status of students or to different time period. When particular theories were accommodated, such as the culture conflict theory and institutional deficiency theory, they were accompanied with caveats so as to not overplay the theory or arguments claiming that the conflict or deprivation could be overcome. And other theories located in the discourse of deficiency, such as the heredity theory, were clearly resisted by the participants.

The participants most often reconfigured many of the theories located in the discourse of rejection. Either the theory was effectively managed so as to limit the negative effects on school and academic success, or it was reversed so as to provide motivation for school and academic success. When the participants resisted theories, such as the acting White theory and raceless persona theory, they argued that school success was colorless. The participants accommodated the theory of acting White, however, when attached to other "White" things such as dress, language, music, and so forth. And because the participants understood success as colorless, they reconfigured the burden of acting White theory into the burden of acting uncool theory. In other words, the participants acknowledged that school success was perceived as uncool at times, but not White.

As the participants responded to readings of various theoretical perspectives located in the discourses of deficiency and rejection, speaking specifically of how they negotiated different discourses, the scarcity of literature (or societal discourses in general) that highlights the successes of African American male students was apparent. The absence of literature that highlights the successes of African American male students (and African American youth in general), concomitant with the abundance of literature that highlights their "failures," begs several questions. For instance, given that the core of African American male students' experiences in school and society in general is persistence and triumph (Polite & Davis, 1999), why has much (if not most) of the research literature focused on the "social pathology" of male African Americans? Who benefits from the absence of literature that might highlight the persistence and triumph of male African Americans? If success and failure, metaphorically, can be thought of as two sides of the same coin, how can one come to truly know the coin with an analysis of only one side? If education research is to serve the public interest (cf. Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006), shouldn't both sides be illuminated?

Conclusion

This study has been just one attempt to illuminate the other side. My (and the participants') chief aim throughout the study was to contribute a different sociocultural discourse about African American male students: a discourse of success. In so doing, however, I sought to refute the simple Horatio Alger Jr. story of success by illuminating the complexities of how academically (and mathematically) successful African American male students negotiate (rather than overcome) specific discourses that surround them as discursive formations. Although at times, the counter-storytelling of success from each of the participants was similar, the stories were never monolithic—not across participants, and not even within participants. Present throughout each participant's storytelling, however, was recognition of race as a permanent and endemic component of U.S. society—not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance—and recognition of himself as a discursive formation who could, and did—as a *self*-empowered subject—accommodate, reconfigure, or resist hegemonic sociocultural discourses as a means to subversively repeat his constituted "raced" self.

Notes

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[1]The terms *African American* and *Black* are used interchangeably throughout this article to describe an individual of African descent who claims the "cultural identity" of the United States.

[2]As noted, the participants' successes in mathematics was just one component of their overall efforts toward success; therefore, for reading ease, when using the term *success*, I am referring to academic and mathematics success or schooling success in general.

[3]Throughout this article, when the term *discourses* is used, I am referring to Gee's capital-*D Discourses*, although for reading ease, I do not capitalize the term. Furthermore, for reading ease, when using the term *sociocultural discourses*, the intended meaning is sociocultural and sociohistorical discourses, acknowledging that discourses of any particular society or culture are in fact contextually and historically constructed within sociocultural and sociohistorical milieus.

[4]Often, the words *postmodernism* and *poststructuralism* are used interchangeably in the literature, but there are acknowledged differences in the terms (for a brief discussion, see Peters & Burbules, 2004). Within the context of Kincheloe and McLaren's (1994) essay, they intended the term *postmodern theory* to be an "umbrella term" for postmodernism and poststructuralism.

[5]See Hilliard (2003) for a critical discussion of how the "gap" is erroneously framed and how it might be reframed.

[6]Kemmis and Wilkinson's "spiral of self-reflective cycles" included planning a change, acting and observing the process and consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, and then replanning, and so forth (1998, p. 21). The continuation of this study does have a spiral cycle, in that the four participants agreed to participate in a future study.

[7]The survey instrument was adapted from Taylor-Griffin (2000).

[8]The biographies were adapted from Moody (1997).

[9]Participants were asked to indicate which factors they mentioned had the most influence or impact, and it is their own determinations of the relative influence of factors that are referred to here.

[10]The Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association in 1998 adopted the organization's official statement on race that disputed the concept of race as any biological human taxonomy. The board, however, securely positioned race as an influential and powerful social and political construct that "distorts our ideas about human differences and group behaviors, [stating that] . . . scientists today find that reliance on such folk beliefs about human differences in research has led to countless errors" (American Anthropological Association, 1998, ¶ 9). They concluded their statement, asserting,

> The "racial" worldview was invented to assign some groups to perpetual low status, while others were permitted access to privilege, power, and wealth. The tragedy in the United States has been that the policies and practices stemming from this worldview succeeded and all too well in constructing unequal populations among Europeans, Native Americans, and peoples of African descent. Given what we know about the capacity of normal humans to achieve and function within any culture, we conclude that present-day inequalities between so-called "racial" groups are not consequences of their biological inheritance but products of historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances. (¶ 12)

Butler (1990/1999) offered a similar argument regarding the construct of gender; likewise, Foucault (1976/1990) offered an argument regarding the construct of sexuality.

[11]Spivak explained Derrida's (1974/1997) *sous rature* (under erasure) as learning "to use and erase our language at the same time" (p. xviii). In other words, *under erasure* is a strategy of using the only available language while not subscribing to its premises or operating according to the vocabulary of the very thing that it defines (Spivak, 1974/1997).

[12]Du Bois (1903/1989) introduced the concept of *double-consciousness* in the following passage:

> The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 3)

[13]The term *rejection* is used here to differentiate it from the critical theory concept of *resistance*. In this context, *rejection* refers to an act of refusing or discarding, most often followed by negative consequences, whereas *resistance* is understood as a legitimate and often positive response to domination, assisting individuals or groups to resist the negative forces of oppression as part of a larger political struggle that works toward social justice (Leistyna et al., 1996).

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