Applying a Cognitive Lens to the Exploration of Social Mobility for African American Men:

A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract
The American Dream which boasts equal opportunity, meritocracy, and prosperity in accordance with an individual’s hard work and dedication continues to instill hope in upward social mobility. Understanding social mobility necessitates an examination of individuals’ or groups’ ability to move upward or downward in status based on wealth, occupation, education, or some other social variable ("Social mobility," n.d.). Accordingly, social mobility within a hierarchical status system like the United States parallels inequality and presents challenges for underrepresented populations. More specifically, there is a gap that exists in the perceptions, generalizations, and realizations of social mobility for Black men in America resulting in a dichotomous disparity that is perplexing and adds to some of the greatest challenges and barriers to social mobility facing Black men. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to employ a cognitive lens to examine factors affecting the social mobility experiences of Black men throughout their educational and occupational pursuits, and/or community involvement; ultimately giving voice to a traditionally marginalized group. Cognitive problem solving styles, decision making, performed behaviors, and diverse social interactions were explored within the context of negotiating overarching stereotypes, overcoming barriers, making good decisions, and persisting towards social mobility. The conceptual framework for the study took into account cognitive function, race, and resilience by way of Kirton’s Adaption-Innovation Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Resilience Theory, respectively. The study findings offer counter-narratives to rebuff dominant ideology about Black men in society, facilitate an understanding of values and motivators, introduce characteristics that aid social mobility, and may inform strategies, policies, and programing that affect Black men. Recommendations for further research are also offered.

Keywords: social mobility, cognitive function, KAI, race, resilience, Black men
Public Abstract

The American Dream continues to inspire hope in upward social mobility. Such hope is grounded in the belief that hard work and merit will be favorably reflected in wealth, occupation, education, and other social variables that influence social mobility. However, a hierarchical status system like the United States parallels inequality and presents challenges for marginalized populations such as Black men. More specifically, a gap exists in the perceptions and realizations of their social mobility, which creates contradictions and adds to some of the greatest challenges and barriers to social mobility facing Black men in America. The purpose of this research study was to examine factors affecting the social mobility experiences of Black men using a cognitive lens, and ultimately give voice to a traditionally marginalized group. Problem solving styles, decision making, behaviors, and social environments were explored via the conceptual framework, which included Kirton’s Adaption-Innovation Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Resilience Theory. The study findings offer counter-narratives about Black men in society, facilitate an understanding of values and motivators, and introduce characteristics that aid social mobility.
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Dedication

This work is dedicated to all who have supported, encouraged, and motivated me along this journey, and especially to…

~ my husband, *Tony*, who never ceases to consider my needs and happiness, and will seemingly follow me to the moon and back in the name of ambition. Your patience and love are my refuge.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This is the first chapter of a five-chapter dissertation. The first chapter, *Introduction*, explains social mobility in America, provides situational background, and introduces the problem and conceptual framework for the study. It further addresses the purpose and significance of the study, and includes assumptions, limitations, and definitions of terms. Chapter 2, *Literature Review*, describes the conceptual framework and associated theories, examines literature related to social factors, as well as, unique factors impacting the target population. Chapter 3, *Research Design and Methodology*, includes an explanation of the methods, instrumentation, procedures, and data analyses. Chapter 4, *Results*, provides the results of the procedures used to answer the research questions as well as a discussion of emergent themes. Finally, Chapter 5, *Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations*, provides a synthesis of the results, implications as related to the literature, and recommendations based on the findings. The appendices contain support materials.

Social Mobility in America

Albeit a metaphoric representation of the culture and values of America, “the American Dream” (Adams, 1931), which boasts equal opportunity, meritocracy, and prosperity in accordance with an individual’s hard work and dedication continues to instill hope in upward social mobility. Social mobility can be experienced vertically, denoting movement that can be upward or downward; or more commonly, horizontally via lateral moves in income and occupation. Intragenerational and intergenerational are additional classifications of social mobility in which the former refers to changes in the social position of an individual in their lifetime, whereas the latter refers to the change in the social position of a family across
generations (Beller & Hout, 2006). For the purposes of this study social mobility is defined as “the vertical movement of individuals within a stratified social system from their social class of origin to a new social class” (Lucas, 2011, p. 97). Expounding on the construct further, understanding social mobility necessitates an examination of individuals’ or groups’ ability to move upward or downward in status based on wealth, occupation, education, or some other social variable ("Social mobility," n.d.). Upwardly vertical, intragenerational social mobility represents the hope upon which the American dream is predicated. Nonetheless, social mobility within a hierarchical status system like the United States parallels inequality and presents challenges for underrepresented populations.

President Obama asserted that opportunity for all is at the core of what America stands for and access to such opportunities should be a reflection of an individual’s hard work and responsibility, not one’s pedigree (Obama, 2014). Nevertheless, there have been a number of economic and sociopolitical factors that have plagued the U.S. over the past several years resulting in financial instability and stagnated mobility across demographic groups. The factors presenting some of the greatest challenges in the 21st century include, but are not limited to, fair wages, affordable healthcare, unemployment/underemployment, and education (Obama, 2015).

Few American households have been spared from the economic and sociopolitical challenges; however, inequities in the distribution of such hardships render social mobility a greater challenge for some racial demographic groups. For instance, a study found that in 2014 median incomes were distributed as follows: Asians [$74,297], non-Hispanic Whites [$60,256], Hispanics [$42,491], and Blacks [$35,398] (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2014). That same study also reported poverty rates as follows: Asians [12.0%], non-Hispanic Whites [10.1%], Hispanics [23.6], and Blacks [26.2%]. These numbers show Blacks lagging behind other races
in household income and subsequently leading in household poverty rates. Another study reported that, “the percentage of children who were living in poverty in 2010 was higher for Black children (38 percent) than for Hispanic children (32 percent), Alaska Native children (25 percent), children of two or more races (21 percent), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander children (22 percent), White children (13 percent), and Asian children (12 percent)” (Ross, 2013, p. 9).

Low income, high poverty origins have historically had a negative impact on access to education and resources from early childhood through college. Nonetheless, pathways to and through postsecondary education have traditionally been a mediator for anyone with access to institutions as well as the ability and motivation to succeed (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). Further, in the realm of sociological studies of SES, Bloome & Western (2011) advance the idea of correlations between occupation and education, regarding the latter they state,

> Education is often measured directly, on the assumption that schooling describes individuals’ potential attainments and life chances. Together, education and occupation form the key markers of status attainment and the dimensions along which mobility is typically measured in sociological studies (p. 376).

Hence, given the above statistics, accessibility issues propagated by income and poverty origins disadvantage the social mobility of African Americans.

Moreover, the social mobility outlook for Blacks in America has been bleak. Reeves and Grannis (2014) posit that upward social mobility is boosted by strong starts in life. More specifically, they assert that starting strong in life, early schooling, college, career and family is critical to success in life. However, Reeves and Rodrigue (2015) report that:

> Fifty-one percent of black Americans who are born poor are still poor at age 40; seven out of ten black Americans born into the middle quintile fall into one of the two quintiles
below as adults; the median wealth of white households is now 13 times greater than for black households; black children are much more likely to be raised in a single-parent household; and although black students make up 16 percent of the public school population, the average black student attends a school with subpar test scores that’s 50 percent black.

Connections between poverty origins and educational attainment are further exacerbated for children of uneducated and/or unwed mothers. African Americans have approximately a 50% chance of growing up in a fatherless household (Obama, 2014), and single parent households tend toward fewer resources and opportunity structures (James, 2012) which further perpetuates a cycle of stagnated mobility. Yamaguchi (2009) conceptualizes upward social mobility in terms of origins and status backgrounds; in other words, where an individual is from (i.e. class status, occupational background, etc.) is a strong indicator of where they can go socioeconomically. Therefore, there tends to be a reproduction of status, which serves no benefit for those born into poor status backgrounds. To that end, he attributes a greater susceptibility of stagnated mobility for African Americans, in comparison to their white counterparts, to poor status backgrounds, higher incidents of being born out of wedlock, and fathers as an unknown variable. This begs the question, “where are black males in the social mobility equation?”

The absence of black males in the family structure has impeded the upward mobility of black families and communities for generations. George and Levin (2015) reference the 1965 Moynihan Report that described this as a fundamental problem and called for national action in stabilizing the structure of the black family for the greater benefit of American society. Forty years later, the American Dream continues to be threatened by the widespread deterioration of strong, stable families (George & Levin, 2015). This breakdown hinders the ability of many
black families to break the cycle and create a new status legacy for future generations. Nevertheless, there are young African American men who are experiencing progressive social mobility. Progressive social mobility embodies empowerment and relaxes the directionality parameters; it also endeavors to contextualize mobility from a cognitive perspective as opposed to an SES or economic based perspective. Accordingly, these men have become adept at negotiating overarching stereotypes, overcoming barriers, making good choices, and persisting towards success. However, this narrative frequently eludes the literature on social mobility for African American men. Thus, a phenomenological examination of the strategies employed by African American men in becoming progressively socially mobile, their satisfaction with their path, and adaption-innovation theory provides the foundation for understanding and building knowledge on what works, when it works, and how to recognize and navigate key life-changing moments.

Situational Background

“As a marginalized population, Black men do not reap the full benefits this society affords to its citizens” (Drayton, Rosser-Mims, Schwartz, & Guy, 2014). A few factors that contribute to this inequity includes under resourced social networks, the influence of overarching stereotypes, low socioeconomic status (SES) origins, and racism. Each of these factors will be overviewed in the pages that follow.

**Social networks.** Robust social networks can serve as a means for increasing awareness and access to advancement opportunities; however, the networks of black males tend to be limited and under resourced. Hammond and Mattis (2005) assert that current limitations in the social mobility of black males are a result of historical misrepresentations and misconceptions, which have subsequently fueled “blocked opportunity” models that marginalize opportunity
structures. In other words, black males have historically been represented as inferior in society with mass media projecting overgeneralized images of behaviors that are threatening, lazy, and incompetent to name a few. This has fostered misunderstandings and a biasing of views and opinions as they relate to the perceived value Black men contribute to society. Subsequently, there has been a systemic effect that negatively impacts educational and occupational opportunities related to awareness, availability, and advancement. With this in mind, providing opportunities for success for this underrepresented and underserved group is imperative for a nation growing in diversity (Robert, Davis, James, & Adriel, 2010). Therefore, an understanding of the access points and information sharing networks leveraged, as well as missed opportunities, may be informed by a narrative of the social mobility experiences of Black men.

This narrative is further enriched by an understanding of the value of relationships and access to resources afforded by social capital, which reflects the strength or weakness of an individual’s social network. Inequalities in social networks precipitate inequalities in social capital, and are likely grounded in societal hierarchies, as well as, classism (Stanton-Salazar, 2004), racism (Brondolo, Libretti, Rivera, & Walsemann, 2012), and sexism (Yosso, 2005). Accordingly, access to resources and information is a realized advantage of social capital because “who you know” affects “what you know” (Nahapet & Ghoshal, 1998, p. 252).

Another factor influencing social networks is social identity. People inherently categorize themselves and affiliate with others accordingly. This is done in an effort to make sense of their social environment (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann & Crosby, 2008). To that end, social identity limitations can yield deficiencies in social networks and social capital.
Stereotyping. Peterson, Philpot, and O'Shaughnessy (2007) reference a school of thought from the late 80s that suggests that black men are viewed as threatening, and stereotypes of angry and lazy behaviors confound their social mobility in America. This manner of thinking continues today. The nationally publicized murders of unarmed Black men, as well as the school-to-prison pipeline that largely effects students of color are two examples of such stereotypical thinking.

For instance, in 2012 Trayvon Martin was profiled as being a potential neighborhood threat while walking from a convenience store and was subsequently fatally shot by a neighborhood watch volunteer. Similarly, unarmed yet fatally wounded Black men include: Jonathan Ferrell in 2013 after crashing his car and seeking help at a nearby house was fatally shot by police; Eric Garner in 2014 behind suspicion of selling loose cigarettes was put in a chokehold by police that resulted in his death; and more recently in 2016 Alton Sterling while selling CDs was pinned to the ground and fatally shot by police and Philando Castile was fatally shot by a police officer while complying with a traffic stop. According to "Mapping Police Violence" 2016) Black people were three times more likely to die at the hands of police than White people, and in 2015 thirty percent of the Black victims were unarmed compared to nineteen percent of White victims.

African Americans have historically been incarcerated at rates greater than Caucasians per statistical evidence dating back to the late nineteenth century in which the former was twice as likely as the latter to be incarcerated to the more recent seven to one rate (Western & Pettit, 2010). According to Mauer (2011), “If current trends continue, 1 of every 3 African American males born today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime, as can 1 of every 6 Latino males, compared to 1 in 17 White males” (p. 88S). Oftentimes, run-ins with the law occur early in life
and subsequently taint future life opportunities, which makes the school-to-prison pipeline troubling. The school-to-prison pipeline metaphorically represents an increasing pattern of tracking students from educational institutions to the criminal justice system due to their rising contact with the latter as a result of school policies such as zero tolerance and police presence (Heitzeg, 2016; Kayla & Judson, 2015). Unique effects of the pipeline warrant mentioning such as Heitzeg’s (2016) assertion that,

“The pipeline disproportionately impacts the poor, students with disabilities, and youth of color. Students of color, especially African Americans, are suspended and expelled at more than three times the rate of their white peers, this despite no documented differences in rates of disciplinary infractions. This racial overrepresentation then manifest itself in both higher drop-out/push-out rated for students of color and the racialized dynamic of the legal system (p. 12).

“African American males continue to be described with words that have negative connotations such as ‘dysfunctional’, ‘at-risk’, ‘developmentally disadvantaged’, ‘uneducable’, ‘enraged’, and 'an endangered species’. Some Black men internalize these messages…” (as cited by Strayhorn, 2010, p. 311). Internalizing such messaging affects social identity and, in turn, social capital and networks as mentioned previously. The messages in mass media communicate and endorse stereotypes about minorities that establish norms about behavior [i.e. lazy, hostile, predatory] and affirm preconceived attitudes held by the majority group from which judgments are made about social inclusion/exclusion and social distances (Brondolo, Libretti, Rivera, & Walsemann, 2012). In the absence of a counter narrative and a restructuring of the black man’s role in our society, unique challenges to social mobility will continue to present for this population.
Socioeconomic status. Less than favorable social and economic standings in society impact the social mobility of minorities. Per the statistics presented above, blacks generally have lower household incomes and higher poverty rates, a formula that limits access to education and resources. Given the tendency for this condition to traverse generations, in the absence of interventions mobility stagnation is likely to be socially reproduced. Hence, it is imperative to challenge the notion that African American males lack the social and cultural capital for social mobility (Yosso, 2005) and present a narrative that demonstrates how they have negotiated cross-cultural social interactions to promote their social mobility.

The intersectionality of race with poverty has historically served to disadvantage black men. Whereas education has been thought to be an equalizer for opportunity structures, hailing from low income neighborhoods with under resourced schools serves to negate access to equitable education and ultimately employment information. However, Anderson, William, Julius, Wilson (2008) suggests that education is indeed crucial for the gainful employment of black males. Further, citing discrepancies between their college completion rates and that of their female counterparts, he asserts that there are “important social and economic consequences for the black community as well as the larger society because the economic returns to college investment are very high for black males” (p. 57). Socioeconomic disparities are much more prevalent when education levels are low.

Racism. Despite many factors in society that speak to the contrary, there are individuals who choose not to acknowledge the continued existence of racism and discriminatory practices based upon race. The American Heritage® New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy describes racism as,
The belief that some races are inherently superior (physically, intellectually, or culturally) to others and therefore have a right to dominate them. In the United States, racism, particularly by whites against blacks, has created profound racial tension and conflict in virtually all aspects of American society. Until the breakthroughs achieved by the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, white domination over blacks was institutionalized and supported in all branches and levels of government, by denying blacks their civil rights and opportunities to participate in political, economic, and social communities ("Racism," n.d.).

Overt racism in many instances has been replaced by subtler acts and microaggressions towards marginalized groups. Bowser (2007) cites evidential situations in society such as: the lack of agency possessed by blacks despite their professional titles; the lack of representation of blacks within the upper echelon of corporations and universities; and the discussion of the natural athleticism of black athletes versus the intelligence and hard work of white athletes to name a few. These represent some of the systematic ways in which racism manifest; however, there are more life threatening paradigms.

Black Lives Matter is a very relevant liberation movement currently in progress to fight anti-Black racism. According to their website, it is an “ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (Cullors, Tometi, & Garza, 2016). Thus, amongst other injustices, it began from an outcry for justice against unwarranted killing of black males by law enforcement officials and vigilantes (Howard, 2016), which implies a systemic problem in the way that black people are being perceived and treated by law enforcement and in society.
Misperceptions have an adverse effect on the social mobility of Black men. This can manifest in decisions made about their inclusion or exclusion with regards to social networks, educational and occupational promotability, as well as, severity of legal consequences related to minor infractions, and sometimes no infraction at all. These scenarios represent potential injustices that have far-reaching, long-term impact on the ability of Black men to persist and exhibit resilience towards progressive social mobility.

Problem Statement

“Stagnant wages, insufficient employment opportunity, and rising inequality” (p. 27) have arrested the idea of upward social mobility for many Americans, making it illogical to assume that the next generation will inevitably do better than the previous generation (Hout, 2015). This implies that current SESs are likely to be reproduced in future generations, which makes the outlook bleak for those that fall on the lower end of the spectrum. In considering the influence of social origins on social mobility as the literature has asserted (Hout, 2015; Reeves & Grannis, 2014), Blacks are often handicapped due to originating from poorer occupational status origins than their White counterparts (Yamaguchi, 2009). Also, contrary to what some may think, education has not proven to be the great equalizer for the uniform experience of social mobility between Blacks and Whites. Much of the disparities that continue to exist are related to access and educational attainment as impacted by parents’ education level, family structures and the timing of marriage and procreation, or the lack thereof (Maralani, 2013). With these factors in mind, and considering the aforementioned discussion of stereotyping and racism, Black men face unique challenges in navigating the social mobility landscape.

To that end, there is a gap that exists in the perceptions, generalizations, and realizations of social mobility for Black men in America. There have been a number of black men, past and
present, that have beaten the odds and serve as examples of extraordinary achievement. However, the flip side of the coin reveals stories about Black men that tend to fall at the polar opposite end and paints a picture of a societal threat. This dichotomous disparity is perplexing and adds to some of the greatest challenges and barriers to social mobility facing Black men. Obama (2014) identifies them as a group that has “had the odds stacked against them in unique ways that require unique solutions; groups who’ve seen fewer opportunities that have spanned generations” (para. 11). Thus, understanding the lived experiences of Black men may aid in bridging the perception gap and identifying opportunity structures by discerning meaning making, facilitating diverse perspectives, and highlighting their unique problem solving experiences with the phenomenon of social mobility.

The approaches employed by current models and theories in the exploration of the social mobility of Black men have limitations in that they are deficit-oriented and often neglect the intragroup diversities of Black men. A great deal of the literature is written within the context of education giving way to deficit-thinking which characteristically tends to overgeneralize, embrace low expectations, assume cultural deficiencies, and silence the voices of marginalized groups (Simone, 2012; Yosso, 2005). Further, there are a number of competing theories in the exploration of social mobility for African Americans that are founded in educational psychology, culture, and motivation to name a few. Critical theory presents repeatedly, more specifically critical race theory as it acknowledges the impact of systemic injustices and attempts to give voice to the experiences of marginalized groups. However, there is not currently a comprehensive model that effectively encapsulates the breadth of factors impacting the means by which Black men perceive, behave and strategize for social mobility. Hence, taking a cognitive function approach may offer unique and comprehensive insights into individual experiences,
diverse social interactions and performed behaviors that have enabled social mobility for Black men. To that end, this research employed a cognitive lens to explore the ways by which this sample of Black men perceived, described and interpreted their social mobility experiences. For this study social mobility has been operationalized as self-reported changes in income levels and SES status, or the lack thereof; therefore, experiences affecting these factors provided a basis for exploring the lived experiences of these Black men in society.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was informed initially by an understanding of Kirton’s Adaption-Innovation (A-I) theory (Kirton, 2011). For this reason, a brief explanation of the theory follows; however, it is important to note that the theory is about understanding diversity as a means of promoting better team environments and attitudes towards change. Kirton’s A-I theory explores problem-solving styles within that context and incorporates a cognitive function schema that links cognitive function, behavior, and the social environment. Problem solving is ultimately about bridging the gap to get from a current state to a more desired state and in view of that, problem solving styles becomes pertinent to understanding social mobility quests.

Kirton’s A-I theory provides insight into the preferred problem-solving styles of individuals through a cognitive lens. The theory posits that all people solve problems, thus all people are creative and agents of change within the parameters of their preferred cognitive styles (Kirton, 2011; Stum, 2009). A-I theory describes these preferred cognitive styles along a continuum between more adaptive and more innovative. Simply stated, individuals who are more adaptive seek to “do things better” and within the existing paradigm or structure while those who are more innovative seek to “do things differently” in spite of the existing paradigm or
According to A-I theory, these preferred cognitive styles are developed early on and resist change over time, much like personalities (Kirton, 2011).

A-I theory is accompanied by the KAI, and an inventory administered to individuals to determine their preferred cognitive problem-solving style, either being more adaptive or more innovative. It is important to note that there is no value judgment placed on being more adaptive or more innovative; the inventory simply reflects “how” individuals solve problems, not “how well” they are capable of solving problems (Friedel, 2014). KAI measures style as in preferred, not level as in ability; subsequently, adaptors and innovators exhibit diversity in the way they generate ideas, manage structure, and follow rules. Additionally, KAI has been shown to be psychometrically reliable and valid (Friedel, 2006). Hence, participants of this study were given the inventory as a means of gaining insight into the way they approach social mobility and engage in the diverse interactions that ensue.

As mentioned previously, the cognitive function schema was introduced under the umbrella of A-I theory. This schema complements the theory in that it represents the brain’s approach to problem solving, drawing a strong parallel to Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. As stated previously, A-I Theory (Kirton, 2011) delineates between cognitive style and cognitive level as they relate to an individual’s preference for structure and/or intellectual capacity when solving problems. This is anchored along a continuum for which some individuals are more adaptive in how they “approach problems, produce ideas, and adhere to structures” while others are more innovative (Friedel, 2006, p. 5). Nonetheless, the cognitive function schema provides an appropriate backdrop for the conceptual framework used for examining the social mobility of Black men. The social mobility construct is situated similarly
in terms of the way people problem solve, generate ideas, and manage structures, and the means by which this occurs within an individual’s environment.

Further, the cognitive function schema delineates cognitive processes (cognitive effect), learning & memory (cognitive resource), and motives (cognitive affect). Cognitive effect delineates between cognitive style, an individual’s preferred way of thinking and approaching a problem, and cognitive level, their intellectual capacity or ability to do so. Cognitive affect deals with predispositions to act based on belief and value systems. Cognitive resource entails the learning process and is associated with memory. Overall, the schema integrates the knowledge, skills and experiences of an individual. Consequently, understanding the interaction of behaviors, learning, and preference in terms solving problems and making decisions provided insight into the literature, which implies a need for improving the social mobility of Black men (Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Harper, 2008; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). For the purposes of this study, the cognitive function schema will be operationalized as follows:

**Cognitive Effect**: Evidenced by academic achievement, undertaking problem solving, seeking solutions, and cognitive processes consistent with preferred style and potential level.

**Cognitive Resource**: Evidenced by experiences that reflects effective problem solving, supporting decisions with evidence, articulating ideas, assessing information, using good judgment, and lifelong learning.

**Cognitive Affect**: Evidenced by expressed values, beliefs, and attitudes, open-mindedness, self-awareness, inquiry, as well as, traits such as fair-mindedness and intellectual integrity.
Critical race theory (CRT) and resilience theory are a part of the conceptual framework for this study as complements to the cognitive function schema. CRT represents a framework that gives “voice” to people of color, which can serve to empower those who have historically been marginalized and silenced (Yosso, 2005). Thus, it bridges the social environment and cognitive affect in giving voice to the experiences of Black men and their social mobility. Additionally, resilience has been conceptualized as a driving force that motivates growth and development through adversity, improves self-efficacy, and restores hope (Richardson, 2002). Accordingly, resilience is also interwoven throughout the lived experiences of these Black men being represented throughout the schema in behavior, environment, cognitive affect and cognitive resource.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to employ a cognitive lens to examine factors affecting the social mobility experiences of Black men throughout their educational and occupational pursuits, and/or community involvement; ultimately giving voice to a traditionally marginalized group. Cognitive problem solving styles, decision making, performed behaviors, and diverse social interactions will be explored within the context of negotiating overarching stereotypes, overcoming barriers, making good decision, and persisting towards social mobility. The researcher sought to provide deeper knowledge about, and a cognitively grounded, anti-deficit perspective of social mobility for Black men. In accordance with critical race theory, the study sought to provide disaggregated, culturally rich narratives of the lived experiences of black men in educational and occupational pursuits, and community involvement. Resilience provided an additional lens for exploring their perseverance and achievements.
Overall, discerning meaning making, facilitating diverse perspectives, and highlighting unique problem solving experiences with the phenomenon of social mobility were intended outcomes of this phenomenological study. The guiding research questions for this study were framed by the creative problem solving framework (Isaksen, Dorval, & Treffinger, 2011) and are as follows:

1. How do Black men who are more adaptive or more innovative perceive and describe their experience with social mobility?

2. How do Black men analyze and resolve key life-changing moments that have the potential to impact their pursuit of social mobility?

3. What behaviors do Black men agree to perform and accept as imperative to gaining awareness and access to social mobility?

4. What considerations of people, context, content, and methods do Black men make in planning their approach to social mobility?

Significance of the Study

“Master-narratives are dominant culture accounts that are generally accepted as universal truisms about particular groups” (Pelzer, 2016). Master-narratives about Black men are often deficit-oriented, marginalizing, and paint a picture of criminal proclivities and/or low aptitude. Such narratives impact their educational attainment, earning potential, and SES from youth into adulthood (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009). Even more, Gaps on key economic indicators such as employment, occupational prestige, income, and job mobility persist some forty years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act (Baldi and McBrier 1997; Grodsky and Pager 2001; Smith 2001; Wilson et al. 1995; Xu and Leffler 1992). (as cited by Mong & Roscigno, 2010, p. 1)
Thus, considering the disparities that Blacks in America have had to contend with related to “education, jobs, business ownership, wealth accumulation, health, and justice” (Flynn, 2012, p. 58), an anti-deficit approach to understanding how Black men have experienced social mobility is warranted.

Weeden, Kim, Di Carlo, and Grusky (2007) posit that growing inequalities in income are perpetuating stagnation in social mobility, a societal concern based on the idea that “life chances depend on social class origins” (p. 142), also referred to the “origin-by-destination association” (p. 143). In addition to life origins, disparities in income can be linked to differences in opportunity structures, meritocracy, and matters of equality which are factors that may vary for different groups. In acknowledging Black men as one of the groups that has been disproportionately disadvantaged by the aforementioned, President Obama delivered a speech championing the need to:

Gather together business leaders, local elected officials, clergy, and celebrities and athletes and figure out how are we doing a better job helping young African American men feel that they’re a full part of this society and that they’ve got pathways and avenues to succeed (Obama, 2013).

This speaks to the collectivism of leadership required to ensure that opportunities for success, however one may define it, are accessible and attainable for each aspiring Black male.

Accordingly, during the president’s 2014 State of the Union address, he previewed the “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative for strategizing and supporting Black men persevering in school and staying out of the criminal justice system (Goldfarb, 2014). Providing opportunities for success for this underrepresented and underserved, yet over-stigmatized and emasculated group is imperative for a nation growing in diversity (Hilton, James, Palmer, & Davis, 2010).
accordance with the above discussion of master-narratives, Hammond and Mattis (2005) assert that current limitations in the social mobility of Black males are a result of historical misrepresentations and misconceptions, which have subsequently fueled “blocked opportunity” models that marginalize opportunity structures. Thus, competent and able-bodied Black men stand to benefit from initiatives like “My Brother’s Keeper” and others that serve as a support network, give them a voice, support their authenticity, and foster the skills/talents that will permit them to transcend barriers to social mobility.

Common barriers to social mobility for African American men are grounded in disadvantaged starts in education, employment, and family. Hence, a telling of counter-stories from Black men who hail from various life origins, have encountered diverse opportunity structures, and grappled with various barriers in their pursuit of social mobility can serve to rebuff deficit-oriented thinking and promote more positive views of Black men in society, which can subsequently impact social interactions. To that end, this study offers those counter-stories that may ultimately inform similar initiatives like My Brother’s Keeper, education and public policies, community programming, and occupational training and development.

**Education.** Per the literature that accompanied the income and poverty statistics presented above, black children are entering kindergarten unprepared and struggling to stay on track through high school and college. Harper (2012) acknowledges the unlikelihood that K-12 teacher preparation programs have challenged their educators to “critically examine their assumptions about Black men and communities of color”; similarly, college faculty lack adequate pedagogically preparation yet they have “entered college classrooms with unconscious biases concerning Black men and taught in ways that alienated students of color” (p. 20). Most
institutions are still fraught with trying to eradicate the educational inequities that disadvantage African American males (Harper, 2012).

Correspondingly, in 2002 they comprised only 4.3% of students enrolled at institutions of higher education, the exact same percentage as in 1976 (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). Also, African American male college completion rates are lowest among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in U.S. higher education (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). Additionally, across four cohorts of undergraduates, the six-year graduation rate for African American male students attending public colleges and universities was 33.3%, compared to 48.1% for students overall (Harper, 2012). The literature on diversity in higher education is laden with deficit-oriented research and the recurrence of access and equity issues related to social mobility, social capital, and social networks (Brondolo et al., 2012; Gasman, Abiola, & Travers, 2015; Harper, 2008; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Yosso, 2005). This indicates deep-seated problems with inequality and discrimination in higher education; the narrative of upwardly mobile black men exposes strategies on navigating these challenges.

Occupation. Learning how to penetrate social networks and convert the access to social capital into educational advantages and potential career mobility is an invaluable learned skill that will yield immeasurable mobility returns (Harper, 2008). Generally speaking, a black man’s social network can be most conducive to social mobility during his pursuit of educational attainment. Nonetheless, being intentional in honing his technical and 21st century skills and investing in social relationships across groups and with high-status individuals serves to positively influence career mobility. To the contrary, the criminal justice system negatively impacts career mobility for black men and is an active threat to them. Black men, especially those that fall into the low income, high poverty bracket are disproportionately represented in the
prison system (Warde, 2013). This disadvantages them and their communities socially, economically, and culturally (Mauer, 2011; Warde, 2013). However, there are key moments in life when making the right decision can make the difference between ending up in prison or worse, or positioning oneself for greatness. Understanding the lived experiences of upwardly mobile black men provides insight and tactics for identifying those moments and making good decisions.

**Family.** A study conducted by Serravallo (2004) exploring mobility socialization demonstrated that class disadvantages influence working class parents’ disposition to inspire hope in the American dream. Mobility socialization encompasses parents’ envisioning and practice in encouraging their children’s upward social mobility via “words and deeds about work, education, and related areas” (p. 371). In other words, depending on how parents experience class disadvantage they may or may not encourage better for their children and socialize them accordingly. To that end, differences in social and economic conditions have historically resulted in greater class disadvantages for African American families, especially males. Therefore, a discourse on multiple paths to social mobility based upon a diversity of influences and inspired by the experiences of upwardly mobile black men is warranted.

Assumptions

1. Racialized experiences have impacted the social mobility of Black men. (e.g. The stereotype that black men are prone to aggression and violence has resulted in unarmed black men being killed by police officers and civilians without consequence (Howard, 2016). Also, in a study of verified workplace discrimination cases, Mong and Roscigno (2010) found a “prevalence of discriminatory firing, with on-going racial harassment and discriminatory
promotional and hiring practices also quite evident…case materials highlights the centrality of racial stereotyping…” (p. 1)}

2. The experiences of socially mobile Black men should be represented through an anti-deficit framework.

3. The double consciousness in which Black men live and work require them to reconcile their identities to negotiate overarching stereotypes and barriers to social mobility.

4. The social mobility of Black men in community and career is influenced by cognitive factors, behavior, and the social effects of the environment.

5. Persevering through adversity and embracing opportunities for growth are cornerstones in the social mobility of Black men.

Limitations

Given the qualitative design of this study, the researcher made all possible efforts to ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Nevertheless, there were some limitations that presented in this study. The researcher is an African American woman and approached the study with certain biases. Aside from self-reported data, the researcher had no recourse for evaluating social mobility in terms other than occupational and income. In that same vein, estimating changes in income and the impact over time was difficult. Additionally, the sample size is small and participants span industries presenting limits to the transferability of the study. Likewise, study participants had to self-identify as African American, which may have negated international men of African descent with similar experiences.
Definition of Terms

- **Adaption.** A cognitive preference for problem solving within the current consensually agreed structure (Kirton, 2013).

- **African American men.** Per the U.S. Census (2010) Black or African American “refers to a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.” Thus this study will employ this same definition for participants who self-identify. Likewise, throughout the study, the term African American and Black will be used interchangeably.

- **Cognitive gap.** The gap in style between problem solvers and the problem and between the problem solvers themselves, which needs to be resolved in order to problem solve alone or in teams (Kirton, 2013, p. 10).

- **Cognitive style.** Preferred manner in which individuals approach problem solving either more adaptively or more innovatively (Kirton, 2013).

- **Cognitive level.** Potential cognitive capacity as often expressed in measures of intelligence and creativity (Kirton, 2013).

- **Cognitive effect.** The part of cognitive function that encompasses preferred style and potential level and influences behavior (Kirton, 2013).

- **Cognitive resource.** The part of cognitive function which stores learned information – knowledge, skills, and experiences to name a few (Kirton, 2013).

- **Cognitive affect.** The part of cognitive function that informs problem solving undertakings, in accordance with the priority placed on the problem and the limits placed on potential solutions, based on the problem solvers’ needs, values, attitudes, and beliefs (Kirton, 2013).
• **Collective agency.** The pooling of knowledge, skills, and resources to act in concert to shape each individual’s future (Bandura, 2013).

• **Colorblindness.** The notion of disregarding factors of race in decision-making processes which many feel permits dominant racial groups to ignore the inequities levied on members of non-dominant racial groups (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010; Harper et al., 2009; Stovall, 2005).

• **Component.** General areas or categories of activity people deal with when they are solving problems creatively (Isaksen et al., 2011, p. 30).

• **Creative problem solving.** A process, method, or system for problem solving that yields new, relevant, useful ways for effectively bridging the gap between the current and the desired state (Isaksen et al., 2011).

• **Creativity.** The generation and resolution of novelty (Kirton, 2013, p. 12).

• **Deficit thinking.** Taken from an education perspective, it is the practice of holding lower expectations for those that do not fit the traditional context of the dominant cultural group, while simultaneously privileging those who align with the culture of the dominant group (Simone, 2012). Anti-deficit thinking would be to the contrary.

• **Double consciousness.** A term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois to explain the identity conflict/struggles that accompany being a member of a marginalized group and seeking to reconcile an internal sense of self with external perceptions while actively engaged in a system that been historically ostracized those identities (Banks & Hughes, 2013; Eze, 2011; Simmons, 2014).

• **Focusing phase.** The process of analyzing, developing, and refining options that have been generated to solve a problem (Isaksen et al., 2011).
- **Generating phase.** The process of generating many, varied, and unusual options to potential solving a problem (Isaksen et al., 2011).

- **Innovation.** A cognitive preference for problem solving by first seeking to alter the current consensually agreed structure (Kirton, 2013).

- **Intersectionality.** The relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations (McCall, 2014).

- **Microaggressions.** Subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed towards people of color, often automatically or unconsciously … this subtle form of racism has a dramatic impact on the lives of African Americans (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 60).

- **Microinequities.** Seemingly minor events that undermine one’s self-esteem and self-worth…They also “reinforce an in-group/out-group dynamic” (Hannum, McFeeters, & Booysen, 2010).

- **Perceived value.** Impression of the target values of others for which people adapt their public image to facilitate relatedness (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

- **Personal agency.** The ability to influence the course of events in one’s life through one’s own actions. (Bandura, 2013).

- **Poverty.** Deprivation of resources needed to “participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged, or approved, in the societies” (as cited by Raphael, 2013, p. 6).

- **Proxy agency.** The ability to influence others who have the resources, knowledge, and means to act on one’s behalf to secure the outcomes they desire (Bandura, 2013, p. 710)
• **Racialized experiences.** Experiences that highlight the saliency of race in structuring opportunities, commonly held beliefs and official knowledge about the competency of socially constructed racial groups (Coleman & Stevenson, 2013; Harrison, 2015; McGee, 2015).

• **Social mobility.** Refers to the movement of individuals, families, or groups through a system of social hierarchy or stratification and can be classified as horizontal or vertical (upward or downward) depending on the change in occupational position and/or social class (Social mobility, 2015).

• **Social capital.** Social structures that yield value through relationship and resource privileges that facilitate beneficial access, support, and outcomes for individuals (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001).

• **Social identity.** The means by which people classify and/or categorize themselves and others (i.e. organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, etc.) to make sense of their social environment as well as their role within that environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

• **Social media or social networking sites (SNS).** Web-based sites where a conversation can take place between two or more people where, in short, there is the opportunity to exchange information. (Andrews, 2012).

• **Social origins.** The conditions and circumstances of early life (Hout, 2015, p. 28).

• **Stages.** Smaller, more specific levels of operation within the CPS Framework (Isaksen et al., 2011, p. 30).
Summary

This study sought to examine factors affecting the social mobility experiences of Black men throughout their educational and occupational pursuits, and/or community involvement; ultimately giving voice to a traditionally marginalized group. Discourse about the negotiation of overarching stereotypes and overcoming obstacles was presented for informing effective social mobility strategies. The study highlighted cognitive styles and the impact they have on mediating diverse social interactions. Furthermore, the study was theoretically grounded in cognition and behavior theory. Kirton (2011) asserts that problem solving is essential to the survival of any species, and in the absence of the instincts afforded to animals, the ability to think and problem solve is what has ensured the survival of the human species. Thus, in accordance with the study’s conceptual framework Black men have experienced social mobility to varying extents based on their ability to problem solve and exhibit resilience in the face of systemic adversities. That being said, the lived experiences presented in this study have contributed to the knowledge base on the social mobility of black men. Furthermore, a counter-narrative of the value of Black men in America has been presented and serves to promote a change in the perception and perceived value of their contributions to society.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter provides a literature review disaggregated based on three segments. The first segment lays the foundation for this study, and describes the conceptual framework, which incorporates the cognitive function schema as presented by Kirton (2011), overlaid by critical race and resilience theories. In the second segment social mobility and social factors that
influence mobility are discussed, which include social networks and social capital. The third segment delves into unique factors related to social capital and social networks that impact underrepresented populations, and more specifically, Black men. Finally, a summary of the literature concludes the chapter.

Conceptual Framework

This study applied a cognitive lens to understanding how Black men problem solve, and perceive and describe their experiences with social mobility which differs from previous studies of their mobility. Flynn (2012) explored the impact of growing up in a low socioeconomic household on African American men’s ability to experience positive life outcomes and found that learning to overcome factors affiliated with low SES was crucial; however, cognitive factors were not explored. Burton (2013) explored the internal and external motivations impacting the economic and academic success of Black men using systems and motivational theories. Cognition was only addressed within the context of needing to feel competent and overall the study found internal motivation, resilience, and communities of support influenced their success. Another study by Agbara (2012) sought to outline and analyze the struggles encountered by African American men in corporate America and the residual effects on their communities. The study concluded that disparities are likely to continue in the absence of policy overhauls. These few studies represent the overall theme of studies regarding the social mobility of Black men, disparities in education and career opportunities for various interpersonal, behavioral, and environmental factors. However, a dearth remains in studies that balance the deficit approach to understanding this phenomenon. Kirton’s theory regarding problem solving style represents fertile ground for exploring the phenomenon of social mobility for Black men; however, the theory’s focus is style and differentiating level and other facets of cognition are imperative to
understanding the breadth and depth of this phenomenon. To that end, Kirton’s cognitive function schema expounds on the personal, behavioral, and environmental factors that were grounded by SCT. The schema delves deeper into cognitive factors, establishing preferred problem solving style as salient and influential, while simultaneously distinguishing it from the other facets of cognitive functioning.

**Foundation.** Literature on social mobility is steeped in discussions of lineage, privilege, the intersection of class and race, and socioeconomic disparities. The generally held belief being that you are predisposed to upward social mobility by being a part of a certain socioeconomic class or you achieve it through the attainment of educational degrees and/or occupational status. However, the literature has not placed heavy emphasis on the cognitive functioning associated with establishing a trajectory for social mobility, and even more specifically, it has not done so from the perspective of Black men.

Consequently, this study was designed to apply a cognitive lens to the examination of salient factors influencing the social mobility of Black men throughout their educational and occupational pursuits, and community involvement. The factors explored included cognitive problem solving styles, decision making, performed behaviors, and diverse social interactions. Factors influencing persistence through adversity were also examined.

Objectively, this study sought to describe the demographic profiles of the study participants; interpret their social mobility experiences in accordance with their problem solving style; analyze their decision-making process during key life-changing moments; deconstruct the impact of the behaviors they have demonstrated in pursuit of social mobility; and evaluate the environmental considerations deemed imperative to their social mobility and overall satisfaction with life. To that end, this chapter expounds upon the concept of cognitive function, social
mobility, and literature pertinent to social cognitive behaviors, problem solving style, race equity and resilience. It further illustrates this study’s conceptual framework as well as the creative problem solving framework by Isaksen et al. (2011), that guided the structuring of research questions for this study.

Foundational to understanding factors promoting the social mobility of Black men throughout their educational and occupational pursuits, and community involvement is an understanding of the multifaceted nature of cognitive function, exposure to inequities, and the ability to persist in the face of adversity. Hence, Kirton’s (2011) cognitive problem solving styles are discussed within the context of the cognitive function schema, as presented by Kirton. Additionally, a discussion of critical race and resilience theories are presented to demonstrate the possible historical and contemporary inequities that exist for Black men in America, as well as, expose value systems and beliefs that may influence their experience with social mobility. The schema overlaid with critical race and resilience theories provide the conceptual framework for this study.

Figure 1 provides an illustration of the conceptual framework drawing a triangular parallel of Bandura’s SCT as the backdrop with each section of the cognitive function schema situated respectively within behavioral, environmental, and personal factors. Solid arrow lines depict the directional, cognitive functioning while dotted arrow lines portray the interwovenness of CRT and resilience within the cognitive functioning processes. Hence, the schema illustrates the interrelatedness of environment, cognitive function (affect, resource, effect), and behavior overlaid by CRT and resilience theories. More specifically, it shows that the social effect of the environment in accordance with cognitive affect, which fuels motivation, results in the development of cognitive resource, also regarded as learning and memory. These factors work
in conjunction with cognitive effect, which speaks to both the participants’ preferred problem solving styles and their capacity, all of which ultimately drive their behaviors and the products they produce. Per CRT, race, racism, and the giving of voice is embedded in the environment, cognitive affect, and cognitive resource. Resilience is embedded similarly and evident in demonstrated behaviors. To better understand each section of the schema, a brief discussion of cognitive functioning and KAI theory will be presented followed by a deeper dive into each part of the conceptual framework.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**

Cognitive functioning. Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986) is germane to a discussion on cognitive functioning because it establishes the need to consider the
influence of psychological factors on human behavior. It further establishes the concept of agency within the context of demonstrating behaviors and engaging with the environment reciprocally to influence desired outcomes. For the purposes of this study, agency refers to the power an individual wields personally, as proxy, or collectively to influence their future outcomes. Moreover, SCT follows a triadic reciprocal causation approach that illustrates the interrelatedness of interpersonal influences, behavior, and an environment that is imposed, selected, or constructed (Bandura, 2013). Nonetheless, pivotal to SCT is the perception of self-efficacy, which focuses an individual’s “beliefs about one’s ability or competence to bring about intended results” (Gist & Gist, 2013). According to Bandura (2001) self-efficacy influences attitudinal dispositions towards self-improvement or self-defeating actions, motivation, and resiliency.

“Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to undertake activities or to persevere in the face of difficulties” (Bandura, 2013, p. 710). This aspect of SCT lays the foundation for the necessity of exploring agency and self-efficacy in the discussion of social mobility for Black men. As mentioned previously, messaging regarding the perceived, and often commonly held beliefs about the competency of Black men can be mixed and contradictory. Further, in considering the ways in which SCT posits efficacy can be built, social modeling presents as crucial to this study’s target population through the assertion that, “Seeing people similar to oneself succeed by perseverant effort raises observers’ beliefs in their own capabilities” (Bandura, 2013, p. 711). Nonetheless, inasmuch as SCT lays the groundwork for understanding the internal and external factors to be considered in a cognitive examination of behavior and outcomes, it does not take into consideration the effect that problem-solving style may have within the complex domain of cognitive functioning. For
this reason, special attention is given to Kirton’s adaption-innovation theory for the purpose of understanding cognitive problem solving styles, and their positioning within cognitive functioning.

**Kirton’s adaption-innovation theory.** Kirton’s adaption-innovation theory focuses on understanding the cognitive function of problem solving as it relates to preferred style. As a means for situating “cognitive style in its problem-solving context” (Kirton, 2011, p. 35), Kirton designed the cognitive function schema. The schema endeavors to provide a visual representation of the way the human brain engages in problem solving. Accordingly, from a systems theory perspective the schema provides a holistic view denoting individual functioning as well as the interrelatedness of the processes. The schema is composed of three cognitive domains and identifies the process by which each operates to influence behavior and yield tangible and intangible outcomes. The domains include cognitive effect, cognitive affect, and cognitive resource, each of which will be discussed in more depth below. Nonetheless, in keeping with an understanding of how the foundational theories complement the cognitive schema, critical race theory bridges the social environment, cognitive affect, on to cognitive resource in giving voice to the experiences of Black men and social mobility. Resilience theory provides the backdrop for the motivation process of cognitive affect and the evaluation of the social environment. Furthermore, it is interwoven throughout the schema through behavior, environment, cognitive affect and cognitive resource.

A-I theory provides insight into the preferred problem-solving styles of individuals through a cognitive lens. The theory posits that all people solve problems, thus all people are creative and act as agents of change. How they express this is a function of their preferred cognitive style (Kirton, 2011; Stum, 2009). Cognitive styles are developed early on and resist
change over time, much like personalities (Kirton, 2011). The theory describes these styles as adaptive and innovative, and situates them along a continuum at opposite ends from one another as shown in Figure 2. As stated in Chapter 1, individuals who are more adaptive seek to “do things better” and within the existing paradigm or structure while those who are more innovative seek to “do things differently” by vacating the existing paradigm or structure (Kirton, 2011). In other words, individuals who are more adaptive may change the structure or paradigm as an outcome of their problem solving approach, whereas those who are more innovative may change the structure or paradigm in order to facilitate their problem solving approach. Further, A-I theory is accompanied by the KAI Inventory which is the instrument given to individuals to determine their preferred problem-solving style. It is important to note that there is no value judgment placed on being more adaptive or more innovative; the inventory reflects “how” individuals solve problems, not “how well” they are capable of solving problems (Friedel, 2014). KAI measures style as in preferred, not level as in ability. Nevertheless, within the context of problem solving, adaptors and innovators exhibit diversity in the way they generate ideas, work with structure, and operate with rules. The KAI inventory measures this diversity utilizing three inter-related sub scores. The KAI total score breaks down into three inter-related sub scores that measure preferred styles for generating ideas (Sufficiency of Originality – SO), methodology (Efficiency – E), and management of structure Rule/Group Conformity – R). The ranges for the sub scores are 17 to 63 for SO, 7 to 33 for E, and 14 to 56 for R (Kirton, 2006).

As previously mentioned, more adaptive individuals look to ‘do things better’ within the current structure while more innovative look to ‘do things differently’ in spite of the current structure. The sub scores follow this same doctrine and provide greater insight into problem solving preferences, in many cases reinforcing the descriptions associated with the total KAI
scores. More adaptive SO scores indicate someone who tends toward generating fewer, more practical ideas that are likely to have more staying power. On the other hand, more innovative SO score indicate a tendency towards a greater proliferation of ideas that tend to have less staying power. With E scores the more adaptive define problems more carefully and methodically seek less risky solutions that work with the established structures. Conversely, the more innovative are less interested in the established structures and being meticulous, thus they accept greater risk in search of broader, potentially structure-breaking solutions. Finally, R scores for the more adaptive reveal a preference for adhering to relevant rules, collaborating, and aiming for group cohesion in problem solving; whereas the more innovative are likely to solve problems by bending or breaking the rules and at the expense of collaborative or cohesion building interactions. For the overall KAI score and sub scores, smaller numbers on the continuum reflect more adaptive behaviors while larger numbers reflect more innovative behavior. To get back to the point of diversity in approaches to problem solving, Kirton (2011) asserts that diversity may be viewed as useful, neutral, or hostile depending on how well it is managed. Diversity is useful when problems are broad in scope, neutral when it is not readily needed, and hostile when it is hindering problem solving processes.

**Cognitive effect.** This domain is responsible for the execution of problem solving by way of cognitive processes. Here is where preferred problem solving style (more adaptive or more innovative) and potential level interact to bring about a resolution to a given problem. Problem solving styles are situation along a continuum, reflecting a normally distributed bell curve, ranges from 32-160 with a mean of 95 and most people falling between 64-112. The scores for males are typically normally distributed around a mean of 98, which is three points higher than the overall population mean of 95.
Cognitive affect. A number of factors influence how an individual perceives a problem and whether an individual prioritizes finding a solution to a problem that presents. Hence, this domain has motive as its operating process. Kirton (2011) identifies factors such as attitude, values, and beliefs as contributing to the “degree of energy (intensity x persistence)” (p. 39) that an individual will exert in the pursuit of a solution to a given problem.

Cognitive resource. This domain serves as the repository of knowledge. Each time an individual engages in problem solving learning occurs. That learning often includes new experiences, strategies, tools, and techniques that may prove beneficial in solving future problems. Hence, new learnings are committed to memory for recall as needed, making learning and memory the process by which cognitive resource operates to bring about a solution to a given problem.

Germaine to cognitive functioning is the influence on behavior, the feedback loops within the environment, and the realization of both intended and unintended outcomes. Cognitive
functioning as a whole influences behavior; nonetheless, within the context of problem solving behavior can change based on the existence of a cognitive gaps. Cognitive gaps exist where there is a difference between an individuals preferred style and the style needed to solve a given problem and/or when there is a difference between the preferred styles of the individuals convened to solve a given problem. To assuage such gaps, individuals may opt to invoke coping behavior and techniques that reside in cognitive resource. This allows an individual to behave in a manner that is different from their preferred style for the purpose of reaching a solution.

Coping behavior should not be employed as a long-term strategy because it is very costly for an individual to maintain, mentally and emotionally. The environment, viewed through the lens of systems theory, and understood through social context is representative of all of the interrelatedness and group dynamics at play in the problem solving process. According to Kirton (2011) culture and climate define the social environment and the evaluations that occur within a given social context. Finally, the outcome of the problem solving process can be a tangible product or an intangible idea; nonetheless, cognitive affect is very influential in pushing through towards a solution that yields either one.

Cognitive function schema applied to social mobility of Black men. As has been discussed, the cognitive function schema entails cognitive effect, cognitive affect, cognitive resource, as well as, behavior and environment. It follows the same triadic reciprocal causation approach as SCT; thus, the sections of the schema are interrelated in the problem solving process. The schema permits the situating of all variables of consideration in this study making it the ideal for conceptually framing this research. The personal factors, which include cognitive influences, facilitate the interpretation of the social mobility experiences of Black men through an understanding the ways in which their problem solving styles manifest in their approach to
becoming socially mobile. Bowser (2007) asserts that many of the opportunities that have been afforded to Black America have been at the behest of interventions and regulations brought about through governmental pressures. He further posits a revision to the social structure for Blacks in America that lacks an upper class and establishes economic mobility in “church, secular, and modern equivalent” strata (p.136). Consequently, this study examines the plausibility of such in seeking to understand the perception of agency held by Black men in the pursuit of upward mobility. Further, exploring cognitive function also allows for an examination of the ways in which level may have impacted Black men’s social mobility by way of academic and career achievement.

Within the exploration of cognitive influence, other influences that are unique to this population must be considered; namely the influence that race and racism have had on opportunity structures in America. With this in mind, as a means of remaining attentive to race-equity matters, giving “voice” to marginalized populations, and transforming hierarchies (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010), critical race theory is discussed within the context of the interrelatedness between the social effect of the environment, cognitive affect which entails the values and beliefs systems that drive engagement and persistence in problem solving processes, and cognitive resource that is the subsequent knowledge that is stored. Additionally, the multidisciplinary nature of CRT permits the researcher to negate some approaches to problem solving that may be discipline specific.

Another consideration in interpreting Black men’s mobility experiences and analyzing their decision-making is resilience. In the face of adversity, there are many issues that factor into persisting, and for how long, as well as, perceiving challenges as motivating or demotivating. The ability to maintain or return to a baseline of healthy cognitive functioning would be
characteristic of a highly resilient individual. Within the context of the schema and this study, there are risk factors and stressors in the environment that can serve as predictors of adversity in the pursuit of social mobility. In the same way, mediators can be present in the cultural and community support systems, the knowledge, skills, and experiences of individual, the value system that one subscribes to, and in the ability to demonstrate coping behavior. Therefore, resiliency theory aids in evaluating the environmental considerations, demonstrated behaviors, cognitive affect (i.e. needs, attitude, etc.), and cognitive resource (i.e. experience, skills, etc.) influencing social mobility. Both critical race theory and resilience theory support the phenomenological design of this study for the purpose of understanding the lived experiences of Black men’s social mobility pursuits, and subsequently have the potential to inform individual and community development efforts.

**Critical race theory.** CRT represents a framework that gives “voice” to people of color, which can serve to empower those who have historically been marginalized and silenced (Yosso, 2005). This proves foundational to this study in that Black men represent a population that has been stigmatized, marginalized and demonized for centuries (Strayhorn, 2010; Payne, 2011; Harper, 2012). Systemic and institutionalized racism have been interwoven throughout American society since the slave trade and opportunities for advancement have largely been blocked accordingly. “The legacy of racism’s historic and contemporary effects on the ability of the Black male to fully function as a citizen of equal status in America, serves as the catalyst for the complex identity formation characterized by oedipal conflict, double consciousness, and a peculiar affinity for white male patriarchy” (Nedhari, 2009, p. 4). Assimilation has been the expectation; however, CRT oppose to this idea. CRT focuses on the following five main concepts:
(a) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination,
(b) the challenge to dominant ideology,
(c) the commitment to social justice,
(d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and
(e) the trans-disciplinary perspective (Solozorano & Yosso, 2000, p. 63)

These tenets frame the lens through which an understanding of the adversities faced by Black men can be viewed. In line with the study assumption, the intersection of race and gender presents unique challenges for Black men and CRT allows the researcher to “center in the margins” (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). Centering in the margins elicits the narratives of traditional marginalized populations, such as Black men and offers the opportunity to examine matters from a different perspective. Examining their lived experiences through their own personal narratives brings opportunity blocking inequities to light and challenges the notion of colorblindness.

**Resilience theory.** The American Psychological Association (2014) defines resilience as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. [Basically] It means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences. “It has further been conceptualized as a driving force that motivates growth and development through adversity, improves self-efficacy, and restores hope (Richardson, 2002). The concept lends itself to an anti-deficit oriented interpretation of the experiences black men have had with pursuing upward mobility. Hence, the focus is on the “how” of their ability to effectively problem solve and navigate their environment and social interactions. Accordingly,
the theory focuses on the strength of individuals and systems that catapult them beyond adversity (VanBreda, 2001).

Resilience theory has been used to explore the Black male from various survival perspectives. Simmons (2014) applied both a critical race and resilience lens in his auto ethnographic study to retrospectively explore his experiences as an urban Black male attending a predominantly affluent white Jesuit high school. Utilizing these frameworks permitted him to understand the interracial dynamics that could have hindered his matriculation, while simultaneously acknowledging the resilience that family and communal support afforded him. His resilience in the face of adversity can be likened to Walsh’s (2012) idea of a “resilience-oriented systems approach” (p. 174), which seeks relational bonds in family and community to fortify an individual’s resilience. Payne (2011) speaks to the coping and resiliency of street life-oriented Black men and calls for an alternative conceptualization of the meaning of resiliency as it relates to them. Payne (2011) further asserts that an alternative understanding is necessary for impacting the develop and shape policies and practices that influence curriculum, educational programs, employment, living/housing conditions, the criminal justice system at large (p. 445). Overall, resilience has been explored as a trait, process, or innate outcome (Richardson, 2002); nevertheless, for the purpose of this study it is being viewed as a process by which Black men have become socially mobile.

Social Factors

Understanding social mobility. Social mobility refers to the movement of individuals, families, or groups through a system of social hierarchy or stratification; it can be classified as horizontal or vertical (upward or downward) depending on the change in occupational position and/or social class (Social mobility, 2014). Exploring social mobility at its core requires an
understanding of opportunity structures, meritocracy, and matters of equality. In America, there are disparities among these factors for different groups. To that end, Hout (2015) asserts that in seeking to understand social mobility, it becomes necessary to examine social origins and their impact on the societal successes of various groups of individuals. Social origins refer to factors impacting an individual’s early life. Accordingly, this brings families and communities into the purview, “enumerating the social facts that block opportunity” (p. 29) and permitting the more objective examination of the directionality of mobility.

Reeves and Grannis (2014) identify five origins that are critical to social mobility. Through the lens of a life-cycle approach fortified with interventions at each critical stage, they posit that individuals who experience strong starts in life at birth, in early childhood education, in college, in the workplace, and in marriage and family are primed for upward social mobility. Conversely, those who are born to uneducated and/or unwed mothers, enter school with subpar reading and math skills, do not complete high school and/or college, acquire a criminal record, or start families prematurely are disadvantaged in the social mobility arena. These latter conditions have specific implications for Black men. For example, the intersection of race and economic status have presented challenges to social mobility for Black as they transition to adulthood and consequently, they have earned less income, experienced subpar educational achievement, and continued to have a lower SES into adulthood (Hardaway and McLoyd, 2009).

Therefore, understanding social mobility requires a multifaceted perspective, which includes social origins and environmental factors.

Considering the disparities that Blacks in America have had to contend with related to “education, jobs, business ownership, wealth accumulation, health, and justice” (Flynn, 2012, p. 58), an anti-deficit approach to understanding how Black men have become socially mobility is
warranted. Generally speaking, literature about social mobility as it relates to Black men has tended towards the pathology of their inability to become upwardly socially mobile. Oftentimes, the literature diverges into two streams of research, educational mobility and career mobility. Nonetheless, within the vein of systems thinking, the discussion of social mobility for Black men would be incomplete without exploring the role of social networks and social capital in promoting upward mobility.

**Social networks.** Social networks are theoretical constructs that are often conceptualized in terms of nodes and ties and the relationships between the two (Henttonen, 2010). The nodes may represent individuals, groups, communities, organizations, or societies while the ties represent the connection, or lack thereof, between nodes. Ties are generally described according to their strength, being either strong or weak, and further relate to “bonding” social capital and “bridging” social capital respectively (Kavanaugh, Reese, & Carroll, 2005). Strong ties are typically characterized by the intensity of the emotional, personal, and reciprocal investment that goes into maintaining the relationship and subsequently building bonding social capital. On the other hand, weak ties are less interpersonally integrated and more transactional in nature, but add value in building bridging social capital that serves to widen social networks and enhance the reciprocity of resources (Kavanaugh et al., 2005). Social networks are enhanced by the social relationships that both bonding and bridging social capital yield. Nonetheless, Kwon and Adler (2014) assert that inequalities exist in the benefits that underrepresented population groups reap from their social networks juxtapose to their majority counterparts.

**Social network and social capital.** Inequalities in social networks are reflected in the attainment of social capital and have likely been precipitated by –isms such as those affiliated with class, race, and gender (Stanton-Salazar, 2004; Yosso, 2005; Brondolo, Libretti, Rivera, &
Walsemann, 2012). Hence, for the purpose of this study, underrepresented populations refer to individuals traditionally marginalized because of their gender, socioeconomic status [class], or race/ethnicity; conversely, majority refers to white American middle- and upper-class. Subsequently, Lin (2000) affirms inequality in social capital as it relates to gender and racial/ethnic groupings and asserts, “evidence is consistent and significant that underrepresented population groups and females tend to be embedded in social networks deficient in resources or in social capital” (p. 789). Social capital has been defined historically from a few noteworthy perspectives that warrant mentioning before delving deeper into the inequalities. In his original release of *The Forms of Capital* in 1986, Bourdieu defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 88). A couple of years later Coleman (1988) defined it as a matter of function amidst a “variety of different entities…consisting of some aspect of social structures…facilitating certain actions of actors…within the structure” (p. S98). Lin (2000) later defined social capital as “investment and use of embedded resources in social relations for expected returns” (p. 786). Putnam (2002) followed with a more simplified definition of “social networks and the norms of reciprocity associated with them” (p. 3). Collectively, these earlier definitions that span the late 1980s through the early 2000s situate social capital as a means to an end in which resources are embedded within collective network, social relations are negotiated and leveraged, norms are adhered to, and mutual reciprocity is expected.

These same principles have accompanied the progressive interpretation and applications of social capital as a value add in the formation and utility of social networks. Kwon and Adler (2014) highlight aspects of social networks in their definition of social capital which involves the
availability of goodwill among individuals and groups that facilitates information sharing, influencing, and accessing resources across [“bridging” social capital] and between [“bonding” social capital] network structures (p. 412). Bonding and bridging ties are network characteristics that help foster access to embedded resources. Knowing the right people can be reflected in what you know as it relates to access to resources and information (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Likewise, in the discussion of social identity the notion of “who you are” also influences your accumulation of social capital. Admittedly, this has boundless implications for educational attainment, social and professional mobility, and ultimately socioeconomic status. Stanton-Salazar (2004) asserts that:

Social capital is fundamentally an economic concept; accordingly, the concept of capital cannot be understood apart from the larger economic relations that dictate the control of society’s principal material resources, the conversion of such sources into forms of wealth, power, authority, and social influence, and ultimately, the unequal allocation of such “capital” to particular groups and individuals (p. 24).

The effects of unequal allocations of capital are evident in social change issues like unequal pay for women, disparities in access to quality education, geographic bias in food security and environmental woes, as well as, “the Matthew Effect” which denotes “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” (Shaywitz, 2008). The investment and mobilization of capital [social, economic, and cultural] and social networks are imperative to overcoming these disparities. Nevertheless, an endeavor of this magnitude requires enabling resources and in the case of underrepresented population groups, such reserves are not always readily accessible. In chapter 2 of *Democracies in Flux*, Robert Wuthnow calls attention to special considerations for marginalized groups postulating the possibility of compromised living situations, inadequate
incomes, physical safety concerns, and childcare issues as frequent impediments to their ability to build social capital (Putnam, 2002). Consequently, in the absence of sufficient social capital, social networks lack the wherewithal to enable the flow of information, wield influence, or leverage reciprocities.

Unique Social Factors

**Social capital and underrepresented populations.** An ample amount of the social capital research literature pertaining to underrepresented population groups is explored from two angles: educational achievement and career/community supports. The former focuses on access, retention, and persistence through graduation in a college or university setting (Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Klingsmith, 2014; Strayhorn, 2010); the latter emphasizes awareness, access, and promotion in status or professional development in the community or workplace (Kwon & Adler, 2014; Michael, Farquhar, Wiggins, & Green, 2008; Smith, 2013). Both strands are underpinned by aspirations of improving socioeconomic status and the allure of transcending social class. Be that as it may, studies pertaining to social capital and underrepresented populations are often influenced by what Yosso (2005) refers to as *deficit-informed research*, a concept she further asserts may be challenged by the critical race theory.

Taking a deficit approach to researching underrepresented populations’ engagement of social capital is problematic for a number of reasons. Most alarming is the assumed absence of cultural worth or community assets; then there are the dismissive attitudes towards social inequalities in education and employment; next is the overgeneralization and stigmatization of poverty and crime; and finally the systematic perpetuation and reproduction of inequalities between underrepresented population and majority groups (Yosso, 2005). Consequently, the deficit approach is an example of institutional racism in that it consistently reinforces social
inequalities (Brondolo et al., 2012). Likewise, inasmuch as social networks, social capital, and social inequalities typify a socially constructed reality, the subjective knowledge created through deficit thinking gets treated objectively and achieves sustainability and legitimation through strategies consistent with social institutions in society: consistent messages, social controls over deviance, and explicit control over resources (P. Doolittle, personal communication, March 19, 2015). Consequently, the literature confirms the existence of social inequalities related to how underrepresented populations tend to benefit less from their social networks than their majority counterparts do from their respective networks.

**Formation and utility of social networks.** Social inequalities related to networks may be attributable to differences in the formation and utility of social networks, and subsequently associated with awareness, access, and activation. These constructs are operationalized within this context as: low socioeconomic status (Strayhorn, 2010); disadvantaged social networks (Lin, 2000); reliance on bonding social capital (Parks-Yancy, DiTomaso, & Post, 2009; Smith, 2013); varying levels of racism (Brondolo et al., 2012); and trust issues (Parks-Yancy, 2011). Differentiating factors for the social networks of underrepresented population versus majority individuals will be postulated in detail below; however, a caveat as a prelude for the discussion is warranted. “The powers that be” dictate that white American middle- and upper-class is the standard to which all other groups should aspire and conform in respect to culture, norms, and values (Brondolo et al., 2012; Yosso, 2005). With this in mind and to reiterate an earlier point of clarification, the key reasons discussed below define underrepresented population [groups] as those traditionally marginalized based on gender [female], socioeconomic status [low/working class], or race/ethnicity [non-white]; conversely, majority [group] refer to white American middle- and upper-class, and in cases of dominance, males.
Low socioeconomic status. The deficit thinking discussed previously is not reserved solely for the majority group; the underrepresented population groups can be influenced by it as well. Accordingly, it cultivates a lack of tolerance and empathy for low or working families, and places them at fault for their meager resources (Yosso, 2005). Still, resources tend to be generational and access limited, so those that have continue to have for generations on end, while those that have not meet with the same generational trends. The limited availability of, and access to, resources has enabled dominant majority groups to maintain a semblance of power and control, which has instigated disparities in the formation and utility of social networks for underrepresented population groups. The messages in mass media communicate and endorse stereotypes about underrepresented populations that establish norms about behavior [i.e. lazy, hostile, predatory] that affirm preconceived attitudes held by the majority group from which judgments are made about social inclusion/exclusion and social distances (Brondolo et al., 2012). This reduces the ability of underrepresented populations to build and use strong social networks. The majority group is not portrayed as disparagingly in the media and thus do not face the same challenge. Additionally, the combination of less than favorable social and economic standings in society typically equate to smaller networks that lack diversity and resources. Given the tendency for this condition to traverse generations (i.e. intergenerational mobility), the deficiencies in networks and capital are likely to be socially reproduced. Hence, the intersection of low SES and race-based factors creates disparities in socioeconomics for Black Americans (Flynn, 2012). However, the majority group maintains the social and economic privileges that aid in reproducing larger, more viable networks.

Disadvantaged social networks. “The notion of social capital suggests a complicated and dense network of reciprocal relationships in which people help each other at different times,
as they have the resources available, but expecting to benefit themselves when they need it at some future time” (Parks-Yancy et al., 2009, p. 560). Implicit in this quote is the idea that individuals have the ability to readily access and activate the resources within their network as needed. However, Lin (2000) and Parks-Yancy et al. (2009) have made the argument that underrepresented populations are generally not entrenched in social networks that are rich in resources, information, or influence. Parks-Yancy et al. (2009) takes it a step further and posit that some underrepresented populations may also be excluded from certain networks due to perceptions of insufficient social capital for worthwhile reciprocal benefits. The concept of the relationship between whom you know versus what you know is prevalent in the formation and utility of social networks. Relational ideas were likely valued and given priority with majority individuals, whereas more practical task-oriented concepts were valued and taught to underrepresented population individuals. Additionally, building social connections and relationships takes time, effort, and money. Individuals have to be willing and able to transcend the physical and mental boundaries to gain exposure to others who may look, think, act, and speak differently. The status of many members of the majority groups can serve to privilege them in knowledge, generational resources, and socialization towards social networks that are rich in resources, information, or influence. Conversely, underrepresented population individuals are not traditionally pre-socialized into strong networks, and the investment to build can appear risky to individuals who lack knowledgeable mentors/advisors, have superseding family/financial responsibilities, or exhibit a predisposition for distrust. Factors such as these make a difference in the realized fruitfulness of social networks for underrepresented population and majority groups.
**Reliance on bonding social capital.** Bonding and bridging social capital are beneficial in strengthening social networks. However, bonding social capital is representative of strong ties and traditionally is laden with close, personal relationships with family, friends, neighbors, etc.; bridging capital, on the other hand, is representative of weak ties and consists of less personal, but more far-reaching connections (Kavanaugh et al., 2005). The latter is generally most beneficial to realizing economic and career gains. Weak ties and/or bridging social capital are given higher priority and present more centrally in majority group networks. Hence, those individuals intentionally expend more time and effort to create connections that span farther and encapsulate resources that may be a greater use in the future. Underrepresented populations do not appear to take such a strategic approach to expanding their reach or resources, and therefore tend towards social networks with strong ties. Intuitively, this may seem like a good approach; however, it prevents them from pursuing connections outside of their usual social exchanges that could possibly increase awareness of opportunities and provide better access to resources. For this reason, and in contrast to the strategies of their majority counterparts, their reliance on bonding social capital limits them to information and resources that simply help them “get by” not “get ahead” (Parks-Yancy et al., 2009, p. 546).

**Varying levels of racism.** White culture, specifically white middle- and upper-class is the benchmark to which many aspire and most are judged (Yosso, 2005; Brondolo et al., 2012). From the perspective of racism, this provides insight into why underrepresented populations do not reap the same benefits from their social networks as their majority counterparts. Racism, overt or subtle, is a barrier to strengthening social networks and building social capital for underrepresented populations. Network and capital building are relational and heavily dependent
on successful social exchanges, none of which is possible in the face of discriminatory, exclusionary, or distancing behaviors and practices.

**Influence of trust factors.** Building social networks is truly a relational process that requires not only the initial investment, but also a commitment to maintaining the connections. The social relationships represent access to coveted resources, privileged information, and influential people; therefore, mutual respect, trust, and reciprocity are imperative for sustainability. Parks-Yancy et al. (2009) and Kwon and Adler (2014) found that underrepresented populations who were connected to social networks that had decent job resources were reluctant to activate their connections to provide access and referrals for other underrepresented populations. Also, impression management research revealed apprehensions from underrepresented population group members about engaging in authentic social exchanges with majority group member (Bergsicker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010; Brondolo et al., 2012). The aforementioned reflect impression management concerns related to stereotypes and being overly cautious as an underrepresented population about not confirming them. Majority group members have not experienced the consistent level of negative imagery portrayal in the media that some underrepresented population groups have, nor do they frequently have their intelligence, competence, or professionalism questioned. Therefore, they do not need to worry about confirming or disproving stereotypes when they embark upon approach social exchanges. They also generally do not need to worry about sweeping generalizations that are unfavorable or backlash if they recommend someone for employment that does not make a good fit. However, these are real concerns for underrepresented populations as a misstep can stifle the growth and endowment of their social networks.
Synthesis of social networks, social capital, and underrepresented populations. Part of the challenge in seeking to understanding the nature of social mobility via social networks and social capital deficiencies that exists inequitably for underrepresented population versus majority group members, is the unique characteristics of individual situations. Examining matters such as these in an individualistic society are sometimes difficult to conceptualize through a collectivist problem-solving lens. Nevertheless, in returning to the duality of the social capital literature, educational settings, as well as, employment and community settings provide fertile grounds for underrepresented populations to begin forming and using social networks. College campuses and communities represent a unique opportunity for underrepresented populations to strengthen their understanding of cultural, economic, and social capital and expand their social networks. This is especially so for members of disadvantages groups as it presents an opportunity to gain access to better resources by crossing group ties (Lin, 2000) and engaging with individuals from higher status groups that they normally would not encounter. Learning how to penetrate social networks and convert the access to social capital into educational advantages and potential career mobility is an invaluable learned skill that will yield immeasurable returns for years to come (Harper, 2008).

Summary

Chapter 2 explains the theories that are foundational to this study, which include a periphery overview of Bandura’s social cognitive theory and Kirton’s adaption-innovation theory. This provided a means for understanding the schema as the foundation of the conceptual framework, integrated with critical race theory and resilience theory a lenses for exploring the social mobility of Black men throughout their educational and occupational pursuits, and community involvement. The conceptual framework was derived from the cognitive function
schema that serves as an aid in understanding the human brain’s problem solving function from the perspective of Kirton’s adaption-innovation theory. This may provide insight into how differenced in cognitive styles influence the social mobility of Black men. To that end, the chapter further delved into the sections of the cognitive function schema, which included cognitive effect, cognitive affect, and cognitive resource along with their respective operating functions of cognitive process, motive, and learning/memory. Other elements of the schema that were also discussed included behavior, environment, and outcomes. Overall, the review of literature exposed a plethora of pathologic studies about the social mobility of Black men, yet a dearth exists in studies that focus on the strategies involved permitting them to realize social mobility. More specifically, no studies were found that focus on the influence of cognitive styles on perceptions and realizations of social mobility for Black men. Thus, this study will add to the body of knowledge on social mobility of Black men through a cognitively focused lens, giving voice to a traditionally marginalized group.

Chapter 3

Research Design and Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology employed for this study. It begins by reviewing the purpose of the study then continues with outlining the framework used to structure the study’s research questions, methodology rationale, research design, participant sampling and recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. Evaluative criteria, the researcher’s stance, and study limitations are also discussed.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to employ a cognitive lens to examine factors promoting the social mobility of Black men throughout their educational and occupational pursuits, and community involvement; ultimately giving voice to a traditionally marginalized group. Cognitive problem solving styles, behavior, and the social effects of environment were explored through the lived experiences and meaning making of Black men with regards to their understandings, analysis, and actions towards social mobility. The researcher sought to provide deeper knowledge and multiple, varied perspectives about the social mobility of Black men from a cognitively grounded, anti-deficit approach.

Previous studies of the phenomenon of Black men’s social mobility have been conducted from such perspectives as: overcoming low SES upbringing (Flynn, 2012); leveraging social networks in PWIs (Harper, 2006); gaps in educational achievement (Simone, 2012); internal and external motivation (Burton, 2013); corporate America struggles (Agbara, 2012); disproportionate representation in the criminal justice system (Warde, 2013); and workplace and leadership experience (Rowlett, 2013). However, cognitive insights, and more specifically the intersectionality of preferred problem solving styles with race and resilience offer an unexplored dimension of understanding Black men’s experiences with social mobility.

Consequently, in accordance with the beliefs of critical race theory this study sought to provide disaggregated, culturally rich narratives of the lived experiences of black men in community and career (Simmons, 2014; Yosso, 2005). Additionally, within the vein of resiliency, this study also sought to highlight perseverance through adversity and embracing opportunities for growth as cornerstones in the social mobility of Black men. Giving voice to a marginalized group by promoting meaning making, facilitating diverse perspectives, and
highlighting the experiences of socially mobile Black men were intended outcomes of this phenomenological study.

Creative Problem Solving (CPS) Framework

The creative problem solving (CPS) framework by Isaksen et al. (2011) guided the development and organization of the research questions for this study. CPS provides an organizational structure for undertaking the process of problem solving. The system allows for the application of ‘productive thinking tools to understand problem and opportunities; generating many, varied, and unusual ideas; and evaluating, developing, and implementing potential solutions” (Isaksen et al., 2011, p. 26). The creative component of the framework requires the consideration of the people involved, process performed, products generated, and the press that includes cultural and contextual influences. To that end, given the purpose of this study to examine cognitive factors impacting the social mobility of Black men; the CPS framework proves ideal in that it facilitates the identification and resolution of opportunities and challenges in a manner that complements an individual’s problem solving style.

CPS is comprised of four components and eight specific stages; each stage has two phases. The first component of CPS is Understanding the Challenge with the respective stages being Constructing Opportunities, Exploring Data, and Framing Problems. This component informed the development of the first research question: How do Black men who are more adaptive or more innovative perceive and describe their experience with social mobility? The generating phase of the constructing opportunities stage yielded the identification of social mobility as problematic for society as a whole; the focusing phase identified specific social, cultural, and economic factors influencing the isolation of this phenomenon for Black men in particular as the stated problem and/or challenge of the study. Additionally, the first research
question addresses the exploring data stage by guiding participants through the exploration of different situations, interactions, perceptions and feelings geared toward understanding the culmination of information that informs their perceptions and descriptions of social mobility. Finally, research question number one also addressed the framing problems stage, which will be completed as participants articulate clearly their understanding of their personal problem solving processes towards social mobility.

The second component of CPS is *Generating Ideas* and its respective namesake stage. This component informed the development of research question number two: *How do Black men analyze and resolve key life-changing moments that have the potential to impact their pursuit of social mobility?* It is posited that in the pursuit of social mobility, Black men have generated a variety of traditional and non-traditional approaches to achieving mobility. Accordingly, the second research question permits the examination these approaches, as well as, the cognitive processes that lead to focusing on those with the highest potential for yielding successful outcomes.

The third component of CPS is *Preparing for Action* with the respective stages being *Developing Solutions* and *Building Acceptance*. This component informed the development of the third research question: *What behaviors do Black men agree to perform and accept as imperative to gaining awareness and access to social mobility?* This research question guides the discussion towards understanding decisions made as a result of the most feasible solutions being refined and implemented. Furthermore, social mobility by definition is a social phenomenon that does not occur in isolation, building acceptance is imperative to effective action and successful implementation of solutions. Building acceptance requires the consideration of people, context, content, and methods which is the focus of research question
number four: *What considerations of people, context, content, and methods do Black men make in planning their approach to social mobility?*

The fourth component of CPS is *Planning Your Approach* and is considered an overarching, interwoven managing component. Its stages include *Appraising Task* and *Designing Process*; for the purposes of this study this component will serve to elicits reflective and iterative thoughts and adaptations were instrumental to the problem solving processes of Black men in pursuit of social mobility.

As presented, the framework is explicit in outlining the components and stages. Table 1 presents the CPS components in relation to the guiding research questions that were derived from the stages and phases. Each component requires a clear understanding of the problem, analysis of alternative solutions, acceptance and action toward the implementation of solutions. Given this framework, the research questions that follow guided this study.

1. How do Black men who are more adaptive or more innovative perceive and describe their experience with social mobility?

2. How do Black men analyze and resolve key life-changing moments that have the potential to impact their pursuit of social mobility?

3. What behaviors do Black men agree to perform and accept as imperative to gaining awareness and access to social mobility?

4. What considerations of people, context, content, and methods do Black men make in planning their approach to social mobility?
**Table 1: Creative Problem Solving Framework Alignment w/Research Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
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</table>
| Constructing Opportunities | - Generate possible opportunities and challenges to consider.  
- Focus by identifying the most promising opportunities to pursue. | RQ 1: How do Black men who are more adaptive or more innovative perceive and describe their experience with social mobility? |
| Exploring Data | - Examine many sources of data from different points of view.  
- Identify key/most important data. | |
| Framing Problems | - Generate many, varied, and unusual ways to state the problem.  
- Select or form a specific problem statement. | |
| Generating Ideas | - Produce many, varied and unusual ideas.  
- Identify ideas with interesting potential to develop or use. | RQ 2: How do Black men analyze and resolve key life-changing moments that have the potential to impact their pursuit of social mobility? |
| Developing Solutions | - Find ways to develop and strengthen promising possibilities.  
- Analyze, evaluate, prioritize, and refine promising solutions. | RQ 3: What behaviors do Black men agree to perform and accept as imperative to gaining awareness and access to social mobility? |
| Preparing for Action | | |
| Building Acceptance | - Consider various sources of assistance and resistance and possible actions for implementation.  
- Formulate specific plans to gain support for, carry out, and evaluate actions. | RQ 4: What considerations of people, context, content, and methods do Black men make in planning their approach to social mobility? |

**Rationale for Qualitative Methodology**

“All research is interpretive; it is guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19). With this in
mind, understanding the interconnectivity between a researcher’s ontological, epistemological, and methodological premises, also known as philosophical assumptions or paradigms, is imperative. Ontology and epistemology provide the paradigmatic foundation to which the complementary methodology is integrated. Ontology seeks to answer the question, “What do we believe about the nature of reality?”; epistemology the question, “How do we know what we know?”; and methodology, “How should we study the world?” (Patton, 2002, p. 134). Generally speaking, any study that is undertaken by a researcher will be undergirded by their philosophical assumptions, which works in tandem to establish what is real and how they come to know that reality. Philosophical assumptions that are mainly interpretive lend themselves to qualitative methodology, and are subsequently primed for research in social science and matters of social justice.

Researchers who employ a qualitative methodology subscribe to a belief in multiple realities, multiple meanings, and often engage in interactive qualitative methods of research such as in-depth interviews and observations (Bailey, 2007). Accordingly, from an ontological and epistemological perspective, this study embraced the notion of multiple realities that are subjective, socially constructed reality, and associated with a social justice interpretive framework. More specifically, the study applied Critical Race Theory (CRT) to the exploration of the lived experiences and meaning making of upwardly socially mobile black men. Utilizing CRT as an interpretive framework according to Creswell (2013) means:

The researcher foregrounds race and racisms in all aspects of the research process; challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of people of color; and offers transformative solutions to racial, gender, and class subordination in our societal and institutional structures (p. 32)
CRT further advances the concepts of power, identity, privilege, oppression, and diverse communities (Creswell, 2013). In a study that at its core examined what it means to be an upwardly mobile black man, the researcher asserted first and foremost that race matters. Hence, it was imperative to give this marginalized group voice to gain insight about behaviors and actions that can serve to empower other black men in their pursuit of social mobility. This is in accordance with the five tenets of CRT as they have been adapted for education: racism remains significant to inequity in America; the dominant narrative must be challenged; social justice/change commitment; the lived experiences of people of color are valuable; and understanding social inequities requires an interdisciplinary approach (Yosso, 2005).

Given this study’s focus on the phenomenon of social mobility and the target population, this study warranted a qualitative phenomenological design. Creswell (2007) asserts that any approach to phenomenology must consider the philosophical assumptions of the approach which include: a return to traditional philosophy as a search for wisdom, the need for bracketing promote a fresh perspective, intentionality of consciousness toward and object, and an understanding that the reality of a given object is dependent on an individual’s experience with it (p. 58). Phenomenological studies seek to understand the lived experiences of individuals, and describe and interpret the phenomenon that is shared (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). In this study, the participants shared the lived experience of being black men who have negotiated overarching stereotypes and overcome challenges in becoming socially mobile educationally, occupationally, and in their communities. Hence, this design sought to grasp the essence of the phenomenon from the perspective of several individual experiences (Creswell, 2007), which permitted a deepening of the researcher’s description of the phenomenon.
Unique to qualitative research is the researcher as the instrument of data collection and analysis, and the intent to gain an understanding of the world from a social perspective (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). To that end, phenomenology requires bracketing on the part of the researcher to expose any innate biases and viewpoints that may exist as a result of prior experience with the phenomenon or population of interest. The idea behind this is to allow an impartial approach to understanding, interpreting, and accurately represented the respective lived experiences. Collectively, the study’s purpose, guiding research questions, and the subsequent level of embeddedness required of the researcher informed the phenomenological approach to the design and analysis of this research study.

Research Design

Moustakas (1994) positions phenomenology as a research method framework and it is this meaning the researcher embraced in implementing it as the most effective and informative qualitative method for this study. The foundational question of phenomenology is, “What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). To reiterate, the purpose of the study is to understand and describe the essence of social mobility for black men in terms of the what and how of their experiences. Phenomenological studies seek to understand the lived experiences of individuals retrospectively, and describe and interpret the phenomenon that is shared (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). The participants in this study reflected on what made social mobility possible for them and how they negotiated within their environment to attain that mobility. Gaining insight into how people perceive, convey, make sense of, and create shared meaning requires a rigorous approach to capturing and describing the experience. “To gather such data, one must undertake
in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest; that is, they have “lived experience” as opposed to secondhand experience” (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

**Interviews.** Rigorously capturing and describing the essence of social mobility for Black men in accordance with the proposed research questions warranted a qualitative research design. As one of the more common methods of inquiry, interviewing offers insight into the lived experiences of individuals in their words, and from their perspective of meaning making (Seidman, 2013). It is generally done in a face-to-face format through verbal exchange, but it can take on other forms as necessary. In conducting interviews, the three interview formats used most often are unstructured, semi-structured, and structured (Bailey, 2007). Semi-structured interviews offer a balance of structure and flexibility; the interview has predetermined questions to use as a guide but can deviate in response to the flow of the interview and the follow-up questions deemed necessary. Therefore, having established phenomenology as the interpretive framework for the study, the researcher conducted in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with participants. Face-to-face interviews were conducted when possible; phone interviews were conducted for participants who presented logistical challenges.

**Document analysis.** In instances when verbal exchanges are not feasible for any given number of reasons, or the behaviors and words that are presented lack congruency Hodder (2002) promotes the “interpretation of mute evidence” (p. 703). Generally speaking, this involves the analysis of documents, artifacts, archival data, and other material culture often out of the original context. More specifically, content analysis is the approach typically used in document analysis, which refers to the process of analyzing text for recurring words, themes, and patterns (Patton, 2002). Gathering documents is generally unobtrusive, and despite the strict reliance on the researcher’s interpretations, the content can be rich in conveying social values
and beliefs (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Subsequently, it is helpful in supplementing other forms of data collection. Hence, to supplement insight gathered from interviews, participants completed a Quality of Life Inventory and Kirton’s Adaption-Innovation Inventory prior to their interview as part of the selection process. Selected participants also later completed an emailed question and answer prompt after their interviews.

The researcher submitted a proposal to conduct interviews and document analysis to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. A timeline and overview of the data collection process is presented in Table 2. The timeline spans from the IRB approval process through the completion of member checking.

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<tr>
<th>Table 2: Data Collection Timeline</th>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
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<td>March 8, 2016</td>
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<td>April 5 - 7, 2016</td>
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<td>April 8 – April 26, 2016</td>
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<td>April 18, 2016 – May 3, 2016</td>
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<td>June 3 - 15, 2016</td>
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<td>April 25 – May 4, 2016</td>
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The research protocol and supporting documents were approved on March 8, 2016. Initial communication was sent on March 10, 2016 inviting participants to participate in the study contingent upon the qualifying survey. Pilot testing of the questionnaire and KAI inventory was conducted in early March followed by pertinent revisions to the documents. Interviews for Rounds 1 and 2 interviews, as well as completion of the KAI and journal entries took place between mid-March 2016 and mid-April 2016; appropriate analysis followed. Finally, transcripts were member checked in late April.

**Preliminary work.** This study assumed that cognitive problem solving styles, behavior, and the social effects of environment were relevant to Black men’s perceptions, analysis, decision making, and actions towards social mobility. The semi-structured interview protocols
were developed in accordance with a set of *a priori* assumptions that were grounded in the literature and aligned to the research questions as outlined in Appendix B.

Pilot Testing

A pilot test of the interview protocol was conducted in early April 2016 for the purpose of refining the interview questions and adapting research procedures as deemed necessary (Creswell, 2013). The researcher attempted to conduct two pilot test interviews; however, only one individual proved responsive. Nonetheless, the pilot participant was selected because of his identification as a Black man and experience with the phenomenon of social mobility; hence having potential to provide valuable insight for the study. Further, the participant’s position as a professor on the campus where the researcher is enrolled made for convenient and ease of accessibility in conducting the interview. The participant gave permission for his interview data to be used in the final report and for confidentiality purposes a pseudonym was utilized. Overall, the participant expressed comfort with the protocol and was very forthcoming in providing responses to the questions. At the conclusion of the pilot the researcher debriefed the participant on the interview experience and requested feedback regarding the process and content of the questions. Based on the feedback from the participant, no changes were deemed necessary. Subsequently, the researcher transcribed the audio recording from the pilot and provided the participant with a copy of the transcript for review and confirmation of accuracy. No additional comments or change request were made by the participant.

Making Initial Contact with Participants

In accordance with those who met the selection criteria based on race, gender, and an expressed willingness to share their stories in one-on-one confidential interviews, targeted recruitment emails were sent between March 24 – 27, 2016 to solicit participation in the study.
During April 4 – 20, 2016 phone calls were made and follow-up emails sent to each individual to confirm participation and the date/time for the interview. Each email provided an overview of the research procedures for the study, which included their participation in two interviews, journaling, completion of the KAI inventory and QOL Inventory, transcript review, and confidentiality assurance. Additionally, the consent form (Appendix C) was attached to each interview confirmation email.

Sampling and Recruitment of Participants

Qualitative research lends itself to purposeful sampling procedures, and more specifically phenomenological studies typically employ criterion sampling to ensure that all participants have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002). The target sample population for this study was men who racially identify as African American and had experience with social mobility as self-reported in the criterion-based demographic questionnaire. To that end, the study employed both a criterion and snowball sampling strategy; allowing for quality assurance and the informed identification and recommendation of information-rich participants (Creswell, 2013). Accordingly, participants were recruited and selected based on the following overall criteria: (1) participants self-identified as Black men; (2) were between the ages of 21 - 59; (3) were willing to share their stories in one-on-one confidential interview; (4) completed the QOLI; and (5) completed the KAI.

“Social media recruiting techniques, while not entirely robust to the inclusion of ineligible units, are useful in their capacity for generating snowball samples” (Spence, Lachlan, & Rainear, 2016, p. 668). Likewise, a number of studies have found the use of social media sites to be a cost-effective means with strong potential for recruiting representative samples from large populations (Andrews, 2012; Fenner et al., 2012). To that end, utilizing the snowball
strategy, potential participants were targeted through the researcher’s committee member networks, and social networking sites.

More specifically, to solicit respondents the researcher posted a request in a private Facebook group (256 members), her general LinkedIn page (241 followers/connections), LinkedIn groups: National Black MBA Association (15,194 members), University of Kentucky Alumni (17,413 members), Association for Talent Development (ATD) (98,433 members), PMI Project, Program and Portfolio Management: #1 group for career advancement (190,764 members), Target Alumni (8,695 members). The researcher also sent a “Distribute to your network” message via her VT email to fifty-three associates plus with whomever her dissertation committee shared the email. The demographic questionnaire was active for participation via Qualtrics March 10-18, 2016.

Selection of Participants

Each individual who was identified as a potential participant was contacted via email about participating in the study; the email included a link to the criterion-based demographic questionnaire. Participants who met the criteria based on race, age, and willingness to participate were targeted for selection. The researcher then sent those individuals the QOLI through Pearson Clinical’s Q-global Assessment website. Once completed, the researcher received completion notifications to her email. Two independent certificated KAI specialists conducted the KAI portion of the selection process to ensure that the researcher was not prematurely biased by insights into scores when conducting the one-on-one interviews. KAI participation codes were emailed to participants, and results were received by one the specialists in a password protected email account inaccessible to the researcher. Additionally, the email provided basic instructions and FAQs to ease the use of the inventory for participants. As each participant
responded to the questionnaire, the independent KAI specialists reviewed the scores after which more information about the research process was shared with the selected participants by the researcher via email. The non-selected participants were sent an email notifying them that they were not selected and thanking them for their time and willingness to participate. The final sample included a total of fourteen participants; however, only thirteen successfully completed the KAI inventory.

Data Collection

The researcher opted for qualitative data collection methods, which were initially designed to include two rounds of one-on-one interviews, prompted journal entries, the QOLI, and the KAI inventory. However, due to the rich information that was garnered from the QOLI and first interview, a second round interview and journaling was deemed unnecessary. In lieu, thirteen of the fourteen participants were emailed a question and answer prompt intended to bring clarity to discrepancies found between their QOLI and interviews. Kirton’s Adaption-Innovation Inventory, albeit a tool that is quantitative in nature, was used qualitatively for descriptive and explanatory purposes in this study (Maxwell, 2010). This was possible by focusing on describing characteristics of individuals that were more adaptive and more innovative as opposed to comparing the individuals, which serves as evidence in support of the interpretations that were made. All interviews followed a semi-structured format to allow for richer data collection, were audio recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed for themes. The journal entries, KAI, and member checks were used to triangulate the data. Pseudonyms were used in place of participant names in coded transcripts to maintain confidentiality and the researcher maintained a reflective journal to control for biases and auditability.


**Interviews.** The primary data collection method was an in-depth, semi-structured interview conducted in-person when logistically possible, and via phone when logistically improbable. Questions were developed in accordance with the research questions that aligned with the researcher’s *a priori* assumptions. In accordance with a phenomenological methods and procedures, the interviews followed a modified version of the three-interview series model (Seidman, 2013). Typically, this model involves three separate 90-minutes interviews per participant, with the initial interview being in-depth, face-to-face and focused on understanding the participant’s life history. The second interview focuses on detailed accounts of the participants’ current lived experiences by asking them to reconstruct details, and the third and final interview focuses on participants’ reflections on the meanings of their experiences. However, due to the time and logistical constraints of this study, the interviews were reduced to one interview and participants’ histories, reconstructed lived experiences, and self-reflection were covered. The interviews were allotted 60 minutes but were allowed to go beyond this time when necessary.

As previously stated, participants were engaged in confidential, one-on-one interviews. The first half of the interviews focused on understanding their life history, specifically within the context of cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors that influenced their social mobility. The second half of the interview focused on gaining clarification and/or elaboration of information that proved residual from the life history, as well as capturing participants’ reflections on the meanings of their experiences as it relates to community and career. Each participant was asked to relay detailed accounts of their social mobilization by reconstructing details about experiences and key life changing moments.
Upon the selection and confirmation of participants for the study, the researcher shared information regarding the data collection process. In early April phone calls and follow-up emails were sent to each participant outlining the journal entries, QOLI, KAI, and member check process. Participants were made aware that pseudonyms would be used in place of their names in all written documents to maintain confidentiality. It was also reiterated that their participation was voluntary and that they could choose to stop participating at any time during the study without penalty. The consent form (Appendix C) was attached to the email. Interview dates and times were scheduled in accordance with what was most convenient and comfortable for the participant.

At the beginning of each participant’s interview, the researcher provided an overview of the interview process and reviewed the consent form to ensure their complete understanding and comfort with continuing. During this time the participant was reminded that the interview would be audio recorded in its entirety. For the in-person interview two copies of the consent form were signed, one each for the records of the participant and researcher. Phone interviews proceeded based on audio recorded verbal consents.

All audio recorded interview were transcribed verbatim, coded, and thematically analyzed. Participants were provided with a copy of their transcribed interview to review and inform the researcher of any necessary changes to the content, a process known as member checking (Creswell, 2013). Ultimately, the final results were interpreted by the researcher, critiqued for validity and trustworthiness, and presented in a written manuscript with discussion, limitations, and implications for future research. With the exception of the pilot interview that was conducted in-person, the remaining thirteen interviews were conducted by phone. Interviews took place between April 5 - April 26, 2016 and ranged in length from 20 - 73 minutes. The
interview protocol (Appendix E) was informed by the four research questions that guide the layout of results in this chapter. Seven themes emerged from an analysis of the data, which included the KAI and Quality of Life inventories and two hundred twenty-four transcribed pages, as having been a part of the social mobility experiences of the participants.

Quality of life inventory (QOLI). The QOLI is a psychometric tool that measure individuals’ satisfaction with life (PsychCorp, 1994). It was developed and copyrighted by Dr. Michael B. Frisch in 1992. Targeting sixteen areas of life, the tool measures both satisfaction and dissatisfaction and is weighted based on the level of importance assigned to each area by the individual. Satisfaction is measured based on the relative importance of specific areas in life and an individual’s ability to have their needs, goals, and wishes met in those areas. The inventory consists of 32 items, employs a 6-point Likert type scale and can be administered by hand or computer. Written at the sixth grade reading level, it explores satisfaction in the following sixteen areas: health, self-esteem, goals- & -values, money, work, play, learning, creativity, helping, love, friends, children, relatives, home, neighborhood, and community. Satisfaction is rated using a scale of 1-6 with negative numbers indicating dissatisfaction positive numbers indicated satisfaction. Accordingly, a negative -6 would indicate extreme dissatisfaction where as a positive 6 indicates extreme satisfaction. Also, scoring is weighted based on the level of importance individuals assign to an area; areas that are rated as unimportant by the individual are omitted from the overall satisfaction score.

The Quality of Life Inventory (QOLI) was administered remotely via computer through the Pearson Clinical website to the twenty-two participants that agreed to be contacted. The invitation to participate (Appendix G) was sent on March 24, 2016 with a completion deadline of March 30, 2016. However, at that time only seven inventories had been completed. Hence, the
researcher extended the deadline for an additional three weeks to April 20, 2016 at the end of which an additional seven inventories had been completed resulting in a final sample group of fourteen.

**KAI inventory.** The KAI inventory is a psychometric tool which measures an individuals’ preferred problem solving style. It is grounded in Kirton’s Adaption-Innovation Theory, which is founded on the assumption that all people are creative and capable of solving problems (Kirton, 2011). The 33-item inventory situates individuals along a continuum measuring their preferred cognitive problem solving styles. Although the inventory yields a numerical score, the value is not only the score. “The value is to use this information to help make better use of yourself and other people (particularly those not like you), for mutual benefit, in every group of which you are a member” (Kirton, 2015, p. 3). Such a utilization can help collaborative efforts, change management, perceptions, and problem solving. Therefore, participants were asked to complete the KAI inventory to gain an understanding of the differences in cognitive styles and the potential impact on the phenomenon of study.

Kirton’s Adaption-Innovation Inventory was administered remotely online via computer. To ensure that the researcher remained blind and unbiased by the KAI score during the interview process, a separate KAI certified practitioner handled the email administration and collection of the KAI's. The practitioner sent the invitation (Appendix F) between March 24-30, 2016 and the final inventory was received on April 29, 2016. Access to the KAIs were given to the researcher on May 31, 2016 after all interviews had been completed and the respective transcripts coded and analyzed. Only thirteen of the fourteen participants completed the KAI inventory.

**Q&A email.** The QOLI revealed areas of dissatisfaction for thirteen out of fourteen
participants. The researcher determined that some of these areas of dissatisfaction had not been addressed in the in-depth interviews. Therefore, the Q&A email was sent as a final stage of the study process to solicit clarification of the reasons behind the dissatisfaction.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2013) advances data analysis as a non-linear process, representing it as a spiral encompassing organizing, reading and memoing, establishing codes and themes, and telling a textual and visual account of the research. Adhering to these procedures, the researcher maintained an open research journal for reflection, note taking, and memoing during the research process. To aid in comprehension and immersion into the data, the researcher transcribed all interviews. She employed Moustakas’ (1994) procedural steps for analyzing transcripts, which represent a modified version of the Van Kaam method for analyzing participant transcripts. The procedure was as follows:

1. Conduct a preliminary grouping of the participants’ experiences.
2. Reduce and eliminate to reveal most significant statements.
3. Cluster the statements into emergent themes.
4. Confirm the themes against the transcripts and delete any that are not explicitly or contextually represented in the transcripts.
5. Create textual written descriptions of the experience with verbatim supports from the transcripts.
6. Create structural written descriptions of how the experience occurred.
7. Create a written description of the composite experience, textural and structural, for each participant in connection to the emergent themes.
Additionally, the researcher used open coding for analyzing journal entries. Codes derived from journal entries were cross-referenced with interview themes for the purposes of identifying convergence and divergence with interview data, as well as triangulation. The QOLI was scored electronically through Pearson Clinical; scores were analyzed as a supplement to the interview process to highlight missed areas of concern that may impact social mobility. The KAI inventory was scored electronically through the KAI Center. Scores were analyzed to gain an understanding of the cognitive problem solving processes the participants prefer, subsequently deepening the researcher’s understanding their lived experiences, and aid triangulation.

Evaluative Criteria

In a relativist paradigm, traditional positivist criteria related to validity are replaced by trustworthiness criteria. Trustworthiness refers to the integrity of a research study or as Bailey (2007) defines, “degree to which results are believable or worthy of attention” (p. 213). Rossman and Rallis (2012) situate trustworthiness in relation to perceived usefulness of a study in that potential users believe and trust its integrity based on adherence to research norms, ethical practices, and sensitivity to relevant politics. Nonetheless, trustworthiness [validity] encapsulates credibility [internal validity], transferability [generalizability], dependability [reliability], and confirmability [objectivity] (Patton, 2002, p. 546); accordingly, “prolonged engagement in the field, reflexivity, thick descriptions, triangulation, member checking, and peer/expert reviews” (Bailey, 2007, p. 185) are all strategies for simultaneously enhancing these criteria. As a means of enhancing the credibility and legitimacy of qualitative methodologies Patton (2002) suggest emphasizing the criteria that resonates with traditional scientific research like emphasizing the use of multiple coders and cross-checks to satisfy the objectivity criteria.
The discourse that often causes what has been described as paradigm wars between quantitative and qualitative researchers continues today. However, qualitative methodology has been legitimized across various disciplines. In support of qualitative research, the literature promotes transparency in method and analysis (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Giving reference to the National Research Council document titled *Scientific Research in Education*, Rossman and Rallis (2012) assert the principles identified that constitute a scientific study are indeed met by qualitative research “systematic inquiry that is deliberate, intentional, and transparent” (p. 61). Thus, in accordance with the literature, continuing to substantiate qualitative methodology in theory and practice requires the researcher’s transparency and demonstration of competence and ethics in practice.

**Researcher Stance**

**Ontology and epistemology.** Within the context of social science research, the researcher rejects the notion of objectivity and an absolute reality, conversely embracing a relativistic ontology and a subjective, socially constructed reality. Accordingly, the researcher aligns with pragmatism as an epistemology acknowledging the nature of knowledge in terms of what is deemed practical and useful rather than what conforms to an objective standard (Doolittle, 2015). With this in mind, the researcher intends to employ a phenomenological approach for the purpose of understanding the lived experiences of African American males. Given this approach, interviewing will be employed as the qualitative method of data collection. The researcher’s belief that knowledge is a social reality that comes through the interaction and interpretations of social actors informs the overall methodology of her dissertation work.

**Reflexive positionality.** As previously mentioned, researchers need a clear understanding of the appropriateness of a given method of research based on ontological and
epistemological assumptions held (Creswell, 2007). Methods such as these usually yield thick, rich data from social interactions between study participants, the researcher, and the field of study. Additionally, researchers are disclosing more of themselves in an effort to be reflexive and increase the trustworthiness of the research. Rossman and Rallis (2012) promote reflexivity as a means by which researchers articulate their perspectives or framing towards a topic, further clarifying beliefs, values, biases, and assumptions. Reflexivity can also be described as a critical thinking process about the effect that status characteristics, values, histories, and decisions made during research had on the results, which are written into the final manuscript (Bailey, 2007).

Consequently, writing is a reflection of personal interpretation “based on the culture, social, gender, class, and personal politics” that researchers bring to research and it is all “positioned” and within a stance (Creswell, 2007, p. 179).

The researcher’s preliminary design plans include an examination of the influences of preferred cognitive problem solving styles, behavior, and the social effect of environment on the social mobility for black men. It is imperative for the researcher to disclose factors regarding her background, as well as, past and present encounters with the population of study as a means of bracketing and exposing the potential for bias in interactions or interpretations.

**Demographic positioning.** The researcher is an African-American female. She was raised in a two-parent household with her biological parents, both African-American. She has one sibling, a sister. However, her upbringing included a close knit extended family, most notably her maternal aunts, uncles, and cousins, all African American. The researcher would like to note a long history of positive interactions with African American males in her family. Nevertheless, the researcher’s experiences with African American males in employment and social settings have been a mix of positive and negative.
In addition to the aforementioned, the researcher would like to note that this study is being conducted during a tumultuous time in America. Police brutality against Black males has continuously made national headlines throughout the course of this study. The researcher has attempted to remain isolated and unbiased by the media which has proven difficult. To that end, the researcher has limited her watching of the news, engagement on social media sites, as well as, conversations with others regarding this topic. This study is also being completed during the 2016 presidential campaign between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump which has also resulted in the onslaught of disturbing racial and gender biases in the media.

**Problem solving styles.** The researcher has been certified in the KAI, and completed coursework related to A-I theory. This certification focuses on problem solving and creativity within the context of diversity and change. Within the context of the theory, the researcher is well versed in the Cognitive Function Schema, which examines the interconnectivity of cognitive function, behavior, and the social effect of environment. The researcher is also in the process of completing the requirements for a graduate certificate in problem solving and change. The researcher would like to note a commitment to supporting problem solving and the management of diversity and change.

**Social mobility.** The researcher is committed to improving the awareness, access, and mediation of factors that promote social mobility for African American males. She acknowledges the interconnectivity of personal and environmental factors in this goal, as well as the limitations to her locus of control. Her personal experience with social mobility has been through the vein of higher education and motivation towards personal and professional growth. Nonetheless, the researcher is committed to exposing multiple, varied perspectives on strategies for enhancing social mobility, and ultimately giving voice to marginalized groups.
Limitations of the Study

Given the qualitative design of this study, the researcher made all possible efforts to ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Nevertheless, there were some upfront limitations that presented in the study. The researcher is an African American woman and approached the study with certain biases. Aside from self-reported data, the researcher had no recourse for confirming household income or SES, which served as indicators of participants’ socially mobility. Additionally, the participants were initially identified via snowball sampling. Although this is a common sampling method in qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2013) this limits the researcher’s ability to truly knowing the extent of the target population and may introduce bias or sampling inaccuracies due to referral networks. Finally, study participants had to self-identify as black or African American, which may have negated international men of African descent who have experienced the same phenomenon.

Summary

This chapter provided the research design and qualitative methodology with justification for its use in this phenomenological study. The design presented within the chapter represented the best approach to exploring the shared, lived experience of being black men who have negotiated overarching stereotypes and overcome challenges in becoming socially mobile in education, occupation, and community. Ultimately, this design sought to grasp the essence of the phenomenon of social mobility for the target population through interviews and document analysis. A timeline of the data collection activities was provided as well as the phenomenology founded method of analysis. Pilot testing, making initial contact, sampling and selection procedures were explained. Likewise, evaluative criteria, the researcher’s positionality and epistemology, as well as study limitations were discussed.
Chapter 4

Results

The purpose of this study was to employ a cognitive lens to examine factors promoting the social mobility of Black men throughout their educational and occupational pursuits, and community involvement; ultimately giving voice to a traditionally marginalized group.

Cognitive problem solving styles, decision making, performed behaviors, and diverse social interactions were explored within the context of negotiating overarching stereotypes, overcoming barriers, making good decision, and persisting towards social mobility. This chapter includes the results of the data collection methods used to answer the four research questions and a discussion of the subsequent seven emergent themes.

The guiding research questions for this study were: 1.) How do Black men who are more adaptive or more innovative perceive and describe their experience with social mobility? 2.) How do Black men analyze and resolve key life-changing moments that have the potential to impact their pursuit of social mobility? 3.) What behaviors do Black men agree to perform and accept as imperative to gaining awareness and access to social mobility? 4.) What considerations of people, context, content, and methods do Black men make in planning their approach to social mobility?

A demographic survey, Quality of Life inventory, Kirton’ Adaption-Innovation inventory, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews informed the data collection process for this study. Fourteen African American males between the ages 26 to 45 years shared their stories in one-on-one confidential interviews. This chapter provides insight into the findings of this group’s perceptions of their encounters with social mobility. These findings were analyzed and used to thematically explore approaches to problem solving, factors influencing life satisfaction,
behaviors performed, social context and social interactions. This chapter is organized around the four guiding research questions listed above. Demographic survey results will be presented first, followed by narratives of specific participants, and finally interview findings that include the discussion of research questions and themes. Additionally, the QOLI and KAI results will be presented in accordance with the research questions they respectively support.

Demographic Survey Results

The demographic survey was divided into two sections. The first survey section required participants to respond based on their current households while the second section asked about the household in which they were raised. There were thirty-four total participants; the breakdown of their responses are below.

**Section 1 of demographic survey.** Participants of the survey spanned an age range of 26 to 58 years and all identified as African-American. Their marital status was single (n = 14), married (n = 15), separated (n = 1), Divorced (n = 4). Their level of educational attainment was high school or equivalent (n = 1), 2-year vocational/technical school (n = 3), some college (n = 5), 4-year college graduate (n = 9), master’s degree (n = 14), doctoral degree (n = 1), and other “college grad with 1.5 years graduate school” (n = 1). As far as employment status, participants are employed full-time (n = 26), employed part-time (n = 1), operate their own business (n = 5), and are full-time students (n = 2). Regarding full-time work experience participants indicated having less than 5 years (n = 1), 5-10 years (n = 4), 11-15 years (n = 7), 16-20 years (n = 14), and more than 20 years (n = 8). Self-reported annual household income ranges were: under $10,000 (n = 1), $20,000-$29,999 (n = 2), $30,000-$39,999 (n = 4), $40,000-$49,999 (n = 3), $50,000-$74,999 (n = 5), $75,000-$99,999 (n = 7), $100,000-$150,000 (n = 3), over $150,000 (n = 9). When asked to classify their current socioeconomic status (SES), they classified as
follows: Low SES (n = 6), Middle SES (n = 25), High SES (n = 3). In considering SES, each was asked about the number of people living in their household to which the responses were: one (n = 8), two (n = 8), three (n = 4), four (n = 7), five or more (n = 6), one participant did not answer this question. In response to whether their children attend public or private school, participants indicated public (n = 16), private (n = 1), other “Charter” (n = 1), and not applicable (n = 16). Lastly, participants were asked whether their children receive free or reduced lunch to which the responses were: yes (n = 2), no (n = 15), I prefer not to answer (n = 1), and not applicable (n = 16).

Section 2 of demographic survey. One respondent did not answer the questions in this section; hence, there are only thirty-three responses. Participants were asked about the family structure in the household in which they were raised and responses were as follows: two-parent (n = 15), single-mother (n = 14), grandparent(s) (n = 2), other/guardian “I grew up in multiple households”. “I bounced back and forth between living with my grandmother and my mother. I lived with my grandmother five days a week for seven years following the death of my dad (my school was on the same street as my grandmother's house and it allowed my mom to not have to worry about getting me back and forth to/from school and worry about childcare). I lived with my mother on weekends.” (n = 2). When asked about the number of persons consistently in the household responses were: two (n = 7), three (n = 7), four (n = 12), five or more (n = 7). Zip codes and/or cities in which participants were raised were: Chicago, IL (60643, 60620, 60628, 60619, 60617, 60616, 60636, 60652); Schaumburg, IL (60194); Cincinnati, OH (45240); Kansas City, KS (66104); Lexington, KY (40515); Dolton, IL (60419); Country Club Hills, IL (60478); 69443; Birmingham, AL (35212); Indianapolis, IN (46205). Household annual incomes were estimated as follows: $10,000-$19,999 (n = 2) $20,000-$29,999 (n = 3), $30,000-$39,999 (n =
5), $40,000-$49,999 (n = 6), $50,000-$74,999 (n = 9), $75,000-$99,999 (n = 5), $100,000-$150,000 (n = 3). SES was classified as low (n = 10), middle (n = 23). When asked the type of school participants attended, they answered as follows: public (n = 27), private (n = 1), and other “Private School K-4; Public 5-12”, “I attended private up to 3rd grade and public school from 4th grade to senior year in HS.”, “8 years public, 4 years private”, “both” (n = 5). In response to whether they received free or reduced lunch: yes (n = 9), no (n = 23), I prefer not to answer (n = 1). Participants were asked about the highest level of education obtained by both parents.

Mothers’ education levels were: high school or equivalent (n = 11), 2-year vocational/technical school (n = 1), some college (n = 6), 4-year college graduate (n = 6), master’s degree (n = 8), not sure (n = 1); fathers’ education levels were: high school or equivalent (n = 10), 2-year vocational/technical school (n = 3), some college (n = 9), 4-year college graduate (n = 5), master’s degree (n = 3), not sure (n = 3). Mothers’ occupations were stated as follows: Worked for the Chicago Police Dept. as a traffic aide, Pharmaceutical Sales Rep, nurse, Driver, government worker, teacher, Postal Worker/Retired, teacher’s aide, Income tax preparer, Retire, Post Office, Stay at home mom/Elementary School Education, Train conductor, grants specialist, Teacher, Postal Worker, Office Manager, Banker, Hair dresser, Retired, Retail Management, Teacher, Accountant + Respiratory therapist, Insurance fraud investigator, Operations Manager, Office Manager, House keeper, Librarian, Nurse's Aide (in a nursing home), teacher's aide, Registered Nurse, and Dept. Manager. Father’s occupations were stated as: Chicago Fireman, Athletic Director, automotive manufacture, Police/ business owner, Financial, graphic designer, Guidance Counselor, sales rep, Labor, Decease, Dockman, Teacher/Administrator, Preacher / insurance sales, Truck driver, Factory worker, Bus Driver, Banker, Postal worker, Retired, Law Enforcement, Management, Bus driver, Treatment Counselor, Cab Driver, Carpenter, Con man,
Electrician, Human Services Coordinator for the county, account manager, Disabled Veteran, and Dept. Manager.

Out of the thirty-four survey participants, twenty-three provided their contact information as an indicator of their willingness to participate in the study beyond the survey. One of the twenty-three was eliminated because she did not meet the demographic requirement of being male; this left a potential sample of twenty-two. Of the twenty-two, only fourteen actually responded to requests to schedule an in-person interview, which resulted in a final participant sample size of fourteen. The demographics for the fourteen interview participants are shown in Table 3. Henceforth, pseudonyms will be used for each participant to discuss findings.
Table 3: Participant Demographics (N = 14)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th># in Household</th>
<th>Household Income</th>
<th>SES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
<td>Doctoral Degree</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$75,000 - $99,999</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ned</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Sr. Procurement Coordinator</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$75,000 - $99,999</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yogi</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Director Finance &amp; Administration</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5 or more</td>
<td>Over $150,000</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Communications Specialist</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$55,000 - $74,999</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyrone</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Actor/Personal Care Provider</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$30,000 - $39,999</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicholas</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>President/Entrepreneur</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5 or more</td>
<td>Over $150,000</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampson</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Over $150,000</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danny</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Admissions Counselor</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$100,000 - $150,000</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timothy</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Executive Pastry Chef</td>
<td>Vocational/Technical School</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$100,000 - $150,000</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yohan</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>City Councilman</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$50,000 - $74,999</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darryl</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Surface Refinisher</td>
<td>Vocational/Technical School</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$40,000 - $49,999</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lionel</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Executive Editor</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$40,000 - $49,999</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reggie</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Math Resource Teacher</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$100,000 - $150,000</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Owner Cleaning Service</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>No Answer</td>
<td>$20,000 - $29,999</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Select Participant Counter-Narratives

In general, participants spoke encouragingly about their social mobility experiences and continue to strive towards greater accomplishments. It is important to note that social mobility attainment was grounded in nonmonetary achievements for many of the participants. Incidentally, in an effort to provide greater insight about the participants of this study, their value systems, and the value they add to society, select narratives are provided in the pages that follow. The selection of which participant narratives to include was made based upon the completeness and usability of each person’s data set. Due to the fact that the narratives discuss participants
within the context of the cognitive function schema, a quick review is warranted. With this in mind, the schema illustrates the interrelatedness of environment, cognitive function (affect, resource, effect), and behavior. More specifically, the social effect of the environment in accordance with cognitive affect, which fuels motivation, results in the development of cognitive resource, also regarded as learning and memory. These factors work in conjunction with cognitive effect, which speaks to both the participants’ preferred problem solving styles and their capacity, all of which ultimately drive their behaviors and the products they produce.

**Eric the tenured professor.** Eric is a 45-year old single man with no children (see Table 3). He was born to an American (White) father and an African (Black) mother, and grew up in Massachusetts. Eric described his father as an academic and his mother as very hard-working. Although he did not always fully embrace the idea of becoming an academic himself, he admits to following what seemed to be a natural path in his personal pursuit of higher education and advanced degrees. He attributes this to the emphasis on academics in his household as well as his admiration of a family friend who was a philosopher. He currently serves as an associate professor at a public, land-grant, research one university where he strives to balance his workload with his more creative, artsy side. To that end he stated,

> I do research and scholarship on things that interest me, a lot of things that have to do with race and racial identification in society … I think this is something growing up as a black person in a predominantly white society and in a white environment I was always kind of aware of the consequences of race and how I was different than a lot of the other people that went to my high school let’s say, so these are always things that interested me and I think that kind of led me to this scholar of I guess race and music and teaching.

Despite his noteworthy academic and career accomplishments, and his self-reported middle class
SES status, he expressed a level of dissatisfaction with areas of his life related to children, play, love, self-esteem, money, and work. Consequently, he scored within the low range of overall life satisfaction on the QOLI (see Table 6).

Although Eric attributes much to good fortune, his social mobility has been influenced by his social environments and educational attainments, the latter of which includes the completion of a doctoral degree. In considering his social mobility from the perspective of the cognitive function schema, the first look is at social environment and cognitive affect. Eric was immersed in a culture, value and belief system that prioritized education, and opportunities were readily available; therefore, he was motivated and supported in his educational pursuits. As he negotiated his way through and amidst various environments and challenges, he enhanced his cognitive resource by becoming proficient in teaching, which he considers to be his only real employable skill, and learned ways of behaving, one such coping behavior being him retreating to his music in isolation. Nevertheless, bearing in mind cognitive effect, his preferred approach to problem solving is more adaptive (see Table 6). This preference has allowed him to excel as a Black male professor in a predominantly white institution by finding ways to make things better while adhering to the somewhat bureaucratic structure of an institution of higher learning.

Overall, Eric values and champions hard work and the cultivation of positive, trusting relationships. In considering his performance within the context of his social environments, being flexible, respectful, and treating people well have been his hallmarks. Likewise, he advises that Black males should cultivate personal and professional relationships within their given environments, be aware of their visibility within spaces and how they are being perceived, be discerning of opportunities that present, follow-through, and show that their work is important to them.
Ned the procurement expert. Ned is a 39-year old divorced man with one son (see Table 3). He was born to a two-parent household that he describes as not necessarily humble beginnings, but that they had what they needed. He readily shares that having his father in the household helped to shape the person he has become. He earned his Bachelor’s degree and works as a senior procurement coordinator with a company he’s been with for sixteen years. He self-reports a middle class SES and attributes much of his ability to become socially mobile to coming from a household with loving parents. Nonetheless, he expressed a level of dissatisfaction with areas of his life related to community, goals & values, and money. Consequently, he scored within the average range of overall life satisfaction on the QOLI (see Table 6).

In considering Ned’s social mobility from the perspective of the cognitive function schema, looking first at social environment and cognitive affect. Ned came from a household that imparted the value of education and hard work, and thus, was motivated and supported in his educational pursuits. Accordingly, when the opportunity to attend college presented, he took it and completed his degree. Similarly, when the opportunity presented for a secure job after graduation, Ned took it and as mentioned above, has been there ever since that time. Ned admits to not perceiving many challenges or undue hardships in his path, with the exception of financial and safety challenges that presented as a homeowner. Nonetheless, from a cognitive affect standpoint, his greatest value has always been family and his belief system has consistently been influenced by his parents and hence, in the face of the aforementioned challenge he retreated to his parents’ home to live and hit the reset button as he described it. Ned’s cognitive resource has been impacted mainly by his professional work experiences and family influences which includes being a father. Nonetheless, his preferred approach to problem solving is more adaptive
(see Table 5) which has allowed him to experience longevity with his current employer as a sr. procurement coordinator and find ways to reinvent himself with the family structure that he values.

Generally speaking, Ned places high value on the support of his family, and admits to having evolved through life’s lessons. Ned did not identify any specific behaviors that he performed within the context of his social environments to aid his social mobility. Nevertheless, he advises that Black males should march to the beat of their own drum and, “not fall in line with what you see in society, on TV, what’s out in the streets.” He further advises on the importance of reading and educating oneself.

**Yogi the corporate finance exec.** Yogi is a 45-year old man, married for 18 years and has four girls (see Table 3). He was raised in what he described as a stable middle-class home with two older brothers and parents that according to him, have been happily married for 54 years. Having taken an interest in business, Yogi has challenged himself to move up the corporate ladder, which he acknowledges has been difficult at times, but admits to having had a fairly successful career. As a director of finance and administration, he has attained a self-reported high class SES status and describes his life as, “pretty blessed and charmed”. Nonetheless, he expressed a level of dissatisfaction with areas of his life related to health and creativity. Consequently, he scored within the average range of overall life satisfaction on the QOLI (see Table 6).

In general, Yogi describes his life in favorable terms. His social mobility has been influenced by his social environments, work ethic, and to some extent, his educational attainments. In considering his social mobility from the perspective of the cognitive function schema, looking first at social environment and cognitive affect Yogi came from a resource
strong, two-parent household. His value and belief system was influenced by his parents along the lines of hard work and family rearing. Hence, to date he describes being motivated by his need to provide for his family, which sometimes requires sacrifices such as his current assignment that necessitates him spending the work week 2 hours from home. Although Yogi admits to not socializing much outside of his more immediate family circle, he strives to create a work culture and climate that is courteous, credible, and communicative. To that end, he has developed his cognitive resource by taking on more than he has to in the workplace, which includes mentoring. However, he has also learned the art of impression management and admits to behaving differently in the workplace than he does at home as a means of workplace assimilation. Regarding cognitive effect, many of the behaviors that Yogi exhibits aligns with the expectations of his more innovative preferred approach to problem solving (see Table 5). This preference has allowed him to excel to some degree as a Black male executive in corporate American by finding ways to do things differently to the benefit of his organizations and those under his management.

All in all, Yogi values doing what he believes is the right thing to do even when it contradicts popular opinion. He also recognizes the value of interpersonal relationships; however, he professes to managing peer and subordinate relationships far better than he does relationships with superiors. In considering his performance within the context of his social environments, he adapts his salient identity to match the respective environment. Additionally, Yogi takes care to follow through on commitments, treat people well, exhibit competence, and be action oriented in solving problems. In addition to championing superior work products and relationship building, his advice to Black males is to assimilate. Yogi states, “some people use different terms for it, you know I don't think it's a sellout, I think it's a smart way of doing
Tyrone the actor. Tyrone, the youngest of the participants, is a 26-year old single man with no children (see Table 3). He was born and raised in Chicago, IL. His father passed away when Tyrone was seven after which his grandmother became integral in helping his mother raise him by keeping him five days out of the week so he could attend the school near her home. Tyrone earned a number of scholarships to attend college and attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on a full ride scholarship. While pursuing his bachelor of science in advertising he participated in internships to promote his career intentions as well as acting troupes to feed his passion. After unfruitful attempts to secure a position in his field, he decided to pursue his passion as a career. Hence, he currently works as an actor as well as a personal care provider. Tyrone has a self-reported low SES status and expressed a level of dissatisfaction with the area of his life related to money. Nonetheless, he scored within the high range of overall life satisfaction on the QOLI (see Table 6).

Tyrone attributes much of his social mobility to getting clear about what he wants to do and taking steps towards doing whatever it is, which includes connecting with the right people. He has the support of his family, but admits that his mother and grandmother maintain more traditional views about engaging in the workforce. Thus, in considering his social mobility from the perspective of the cognitive function schema, looking first at social environment and cognitive affect, he was a part of a support system that valued and prioritized education as well as a traditional trajectory towards social mobility. However, when faced with lacking financial resources to foster his motivation towards higher education, Tyrone proactively sought out connections and opportunities that would prove valuable. As he negotiated his way through and amidst various environments and challenges, he enhanced his cognitive resource by honing his
acting skills while simultaneously completing his degree, and learned the tricks of the trade by leveraging his interpersonal relationships. Tyrone later decided to use this knowledge to shift from pursuing full-time work opportunities in accordance with his degree, to seeking acting roles in accordance with his passion. Nonetheless, his approach to doing so was manageable, methodical, and adhered to the written and unwritten rules of the acting industry. This aligns with his more adaptive preference for problem solving per cognitive effect (see Table 5). Consequently, he has enjoyed fairly steady work as an extra on various TV shows filmed in the Chicago area and continues to receive dividends accordingly.

Tyrone was clear in valuing the cultivation of relationships and champions following your dreams. In considering his performance within the context of his social environments, Tyrone embodies a “by any means necessary type attitude” and not taking no for an answer. Likewise, he advises Black males to march to the beat of their own drum, trust their instincts, and follow their passions. He expounds upon this in stating, “It might not be what everyone else has done and you might not think it's even attainable but it actually is ‘cause anything is possible… And the worst thing somebody can ever tell you is, no.”

**Nicholas the dreaming entrepreneur.** Nicholas is a 41-year old married man with two children (see Table 3). He is an entrepreneur and currently owns and operates two airport based restaurants. He describes himself as a dreamer and a very visual person which are attributes that he uses, in accordance with his faith, to manifest the life he envisions for himself. He was raised by a single mother who advised him, “Decisions you make today affect your tomorrow” and thus he resolved, “so if I make good decisions I will have good results…so let me just, every day, every week, make good decisions.” Nicholas has earned a master’s degree and self-reports a middle class SES status; however, he
expressed a level of dissatisfaction with the helping area of his life and subsequently scored within the average range of overall life satisfaction on the QOLI (see Table 6).

Nicholas’ attributes his ability to be social mobile to his faith, family, and legacy. According to him, he has made good decisions regarding his social circles, educational pursuits, fraternal affiliation, and marrying a good woman; all of which he believes have sent him down a certain path. In considering his social mobility from the perspective of the cognitive function schema, looking first at social environment and cognitive affect it is clear that he was immersed in a culture, value and belief system that prioritized education, family, and faith. The making of good decisions was seen as foundational to learning and gaining access to opportunities; thus, he was motivated and supported in accordance with this attitude. As he negotiated his way through and amidst various environments and challenges, he enhanced his cognitive resource through necessary sacrifices to gain experience and knowledge, and learned skills and life lessons through affiliating with the right people. Nicholas also learned and behaved boldly in his approach to social mobility, characteristics grounded in his faith, ancestry, and willingness to dream big. In considering cognitive effect, his preferred approach to problem solving is more innovative (see Table 5). This preference influenced his ability to excel in the airport restaurant business, an endeavor that started from a dream, lacked initial funding, and manifested in spite of him having no prior experience.

In general, Nicholas values self-reflection, so much so that if a redo was possible, journaling would be the one thing he would do differently. He is very much focused on being the best he can be and leaving a legacy for his children. To that end, Nicholas engages a small circle of mentors from which he seeks advice to stay on track. When considering the advice he would offer to Black males, he considers his son, but admits he would advise his daughter in the same
manner, and that advice is to be like an eagle. With this in mind, Nicholas described the characteristics of eagles as follows: eagles have great vision; eagles are fearless; eagles don’t eat what they don’t kill to which he likens to being honest and having integrity; eagles fly in storms, which sometimes requires them to fly at higher heights; eagles don’t hang with pigeons which I he metaphorically links to surrounding yourself with like-minded people.

**Sampson the engineer.** Sampson is a 44-year old divorced man with one son (see Table 3). He was influenced by his mother and grandfather, who imparted a strong sense of family that he continues to prioritize today. Both have passed on and he acknowledges his aunt as his biggest supporter and confidante now. Sampson was the first in his family to graduate from college; thus his social mobility has been influenced by his educational attainments, which include the completion of a master’s degree as well as his drive to elevate his family. In considering his strong sense of responsibility he shares, “I'm not the oldest but probably the most productive male figure in the family, so, I guess I stand as the patriarch of the family so to speak.” Sampson is an engineer by trade and his self-reports his SES status as middle class. Nonetheless, despite his educational and professional achievements, he expressed a level of dissatisfaction with areas of his life related to work, neighborhood, and community. One matter of mobility concern that he shared was,

I’ve been at the same job for 16 years, and looking back on it, if I probably would've moved around a little bit in terms of career moves from you know, say another company that might of...money is not the most important thing, but I think that changing jobs a couple of times, that might've resulted in me being at some higher position career-wise. Nonetheless, he scored within the average range of overall life satisfaction on the QOLI (see Table 6).
As mentioned above, Sampson’s social mobility has been influenced by his educational attainments, which entails him being a first generation college-goer. In considering his social mobility from the perspective of the cognitive function schema, looking first at social environment and cognitive affect he admits that everything he does is pretty much for the betterment of his family. To that end, he was instilled with a value system that prioritizes family and thus remains motivated towards anything that will help him improve the state of his family. As he negotiated his way through and amidst various environments and challenges, he enhanced his cognitive resource through formal education and on-the-job experience. He also mentioned that in his early life he followed the teachings of Islam to stay focused and out of harm’s way. Nonetheless, he shares that he is now playing catch-up to get his family and lifestyle on track with his expectations. To that end he admits to not caring about social status or how his behaviors are being perceived by others, his only focus is doing what it takes to make sure his family is okay. Moving into the cognitive effect portion of the schema, Sampson’s preferred approach to problem solving is more innovative (see Table 5). This preference allows him to more readily explore and accept different ways of elevating his family.

Altogether, Sampson values and champions hard work, loyalty, and commitment to family. In considering his performance within the context of his social environments, it has been his ability to remain productive and be consistent in terms of adhering to his values that have been key. Further, he is strongly motivated by his responsibility for his child and greater family. In view of that, he aspires towards entrepreneurship and the generation of wealth, or as he describes,

Something that the next generation, the next generation my son and other people within my family that they can actually have something that they're working towards versus,
kinda the status quo of going to college and work for someone else.
Likewise, he advises that Black males should, “Take care family first and only worry about the things you can control.”

Danny the counseling preacher. Danny is a 38-year old married man with one son (see Table 3). He was raised as an only child between the south side of Chicago and its Northwest suburbs by his mother and grandmother. Although he currently works as an admissions counselor at a Midwest university, he discloses that he also functions as a preacher. Accordingly, he is very much spiritually led and attributes his social mobility to his faith, which has influenced his educational pursuits as well. Danny is currently enrollment in a doctoral program focusing on research related to fatherlessness and black American community. Although he believes that he is called to pastor a traditional church, he has found a congregation amongst the students he counsels. However, his path has not been without frustration as self-reflected and expressed challenges with,

Having unrealistic expectations and then as [it] relates to positioning myself to pastor a church, subjecting myself to people and a process that is false. So, what I mean by that…for a job posting they [people] will say they want one thing in a candidate then when I interviewed, because I feel like I fit the criteria that they’re looking for, it looks good on paper but what they actually want is somebody who they can manipulate or somebody who can carry on a tradition that has been established in a particular place. So that has been my greatest hindrance, frustration in my professional ministry experience.

Hence, despite his accomplishments, and his self-reported middle class SES status, he expressed a level of dissatisfaction with areas of his life related to money and health. Consequently, he scored within the average range of overall life satisfaction on the QOLI (see Table 6).
As mentioned above, Danny’s social mobility has been influenced by his faith and educational pursuits. From the perspective of the cognitive function schema, looking first at social environment and cognitive affect he came from an environment that placed value on faith, education, and Black culture. Hence, he was motivated and supported in his educational pursuits as well as his faith pursuit to pastorhood; in both of these regards he employs a social justice lens. Nonetheless, as Danny has negotiated his way through and amidst various environments and challenges, he enhanced his cognitive resource by becoming proficient in counseling and ministry, regarding his students as his congregation. He further works to manage his expectations, communicate effectively, and behave in a manner that allows for balance in his life. However, in sharing his frustrations he admitted to coping through eating, shopping, sleeping, and golfing. In considering cognitive effect, Danny’s overall preferred approach to problem solving falls in the middle of being more adaptive and more innovative (see Table 5) which can imply a more seamless ability to employ an approach that best suits a given problem. This preference influenced the way he managed being a victim of identity fraud by allowing him the scope to explore various resolutions and implement the most fitting for the situation. On the other hand, because of that experience fraud he speaks to a desire to stay within certain paradigms by stating, “I'm looking for stability and security in all things”.

Nevertheless, Danny still values being present and accessible in his interpersonal relationships and he champions social justice in his approach to ministry. Furthermore, as a self-identified teacher and mentor with an understanding of the challenges faces Blacks in America, he is an advocate. According to Danny,

I am informed, I am very clear, I am black, I love black people, I don’t love everything that we do, but I feel an obligation to help preserve the part of the culture that I love. I
feel an obligation to preserve the richness and the history, and so out of that love informs my behaviors, it informs my passion, it informs my engagement with my people because I don't like where I see we are at and where we’re going.

**Timothy the chef.** Timothy is a 37-year old man, married with one son (see Table 3). He is originally from Chicago, IL, but currently resides in Las Vegas and works as an executive pastry chef for MGM Resorts International. Timothy describes himself as unapologetically Black and unapologetically Christian, terms derived from his home church located in Chicago, IL, Trinity United Church of Christ of which he remains a member. Having always wanted to become chef, he attended culinary school at Kendall College. After graduation he took a road trip to Las Vegas and connected with a former student of his mother’s which led to a job interview and subsequently a job with the Four Seasons. Timothy has taken advantage of opportunities that presented, gaining work experience and proactively honing his craft through various Las Vegas and Caribbean resort brands. He self-reports a middle class SES, but expressed a level of dissatisfaction with the work area of his life, and more specifically the challenge to achieve work life balance. Consequently, he scored within the average range of overall life satisfaction on the QOLI (see Table 6).

Timothy’s social mobility has been influenced by his work ethic and further, he attributes it to his, “willingness to take on different roles and responsibilities … being able to adapt to things changing quickly, being able to adapt to different situations.” He displayed this prominently when he was passed over for a promotion with an organization he felt he’d been loyal to; he immediately gave notice, left that organization altogether and found a much better position with his current organization. In considering cognitive effect, Timothy’s handling of that situation reflects his more innovative preferred problem solving style (see Table 5). From
the perspective of the other sections of the cognitive function schema, Timothy came from an environment that values education, his mother was a high school teacher, family, faith and Black culture as mentioned above in his descriptors of being unapologetically Black and Christian. Considering cognitive affect, his value system and love of food fueled his motivation towards his goal of becoming a chef. Hence, he enhanced his cognitive resource through vocational school and hands-on experience. He believes that the main behavioral influences on his social mobility are his work ethic and ability to produce good products. To that end, he attributes any challenges that he may have faced simply to his work not being good enough and responded by working to improve his craft.

Timothy values learning from others through observation and feedback, highly regards the opinions of his wife and mentors, and champions letting his work speak for itself. He advises Black males to be really good at what you doing, admonishing, “You don’t have to be the best, there’s always going to be somebody better than you, [but] know your craft, know your work, and let that speak for itself, because that will get you in the door every time.”

**Lionel the journalist.** Lionel is a 31-year old single man with no children (see Table 3). He shared that he was from Birmingham, AL and now resides in Nashville, TN, a place he describes as a hub for Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCU). He completed a couple of years at Tennessee State University and subsequently considers himself an advocate of HBCUs. It is here that he believes that he came into his own as an adult and ultimately decided to pursue his journalism passion which led to his current career as a magazine editor with an affinity for photography and graphic design as well. He admits to not always having aligned educationally with this passion in stating,

When I initially came to college I had taken like five years of math and so I had kind of
accepted a trajectory that was kind of dictated to me by my family, to go off into engineering and stuff like that. And so I did, [I] went on that path for the first couple years of schools and even got up into really high levels of math and I think I hit my wall. Nevertheless, despite changing his major he experiences financial struggles with funding for school which led to attending off and on, and ultimately foregoing the degree for full-time employment. Lionel self-reported a middle class SES status; however, he expressed a level of dissatisfaction with areas of his life related to health, money, work, and love. Consequently, he scored within the low range of overall life satisfaction on the QOLI (see Table 6).

Lionel’s social mobility has been influenced by his social environments and educational pursuits, inasmuch as they permitted him to grow in independence and self-actualization. In considering his social mobility from the perspective of the cognitive function schema, looking first at social environment and cognitive affect, he came from an environment that valued education and family. To that end, he scored very well on the ACT, cultivated a wealth of scholarships to college, and accepted a trajectory that he feels was dictated to him by his family. Thus, he was motivated and supported in his educational pursuits along a path towards engineering; however, as he negotiated his way through college and financial challenges, he realized that his was no longer motivated by the same needs and values. Thus, Lionel enhanced his cognitive resource by taking opportunities to pursue his journalism passion and building his skill set in the nuances of journalism, magazine editing, photography, digital media, and things of the sort. He maintained his value of family and learned to create surrogate families in his given environment when he could be with his traditional family and friends. Nevertheless, bearing in mind cognitive effect, his preferred approach to problem solving is more innovative (see Table 5). This preference has allowed him to excel in his profession and respective
environments by being open to breaking molds, exploring the unexplored, and challenging the status quo.

Lionel’s overall preferred approach to problem solving is more innovative hinting towards a predisposition for working in spite of structure to make things different (see Table 5). He values family, creating a home base, and being intentional with planning. Further, he understands the need to make responsible sacrifices and cultivate good relationships. He spoke to being inspired by his mother and intentional about cultivating a positive relationship with her as an adult by sharing,

I have a really close relationship with my mom just because I'm really inspired by her, you know she sacrificed a lot. My mom had three sets of twins and a leap year baby. She was a business owner; she kinda started her career as a respiratory therapist and for like 30 years she's been an accountant and bookkeeper so she's been very entrepreneurial minded and that kinda has influenced me over the years.

In considering his performance within the context of his social environments he attributes his success to being able to manage his own and other people’s egos, as well as make people comfortable. He stated, “I just kinda approach people from a place of genuine interest in who they are and what it is that they are trying to communicate at the time.” He also shared,

I'm very unapologetically Black. I mean I'm not, not to the point where it's offensive, but I know I'm black and I'm affirmed in my blackness and I'm cool with it and I think that being black we have a unique perspective and unique energy that we bring, we bring black folk magic to the table.

Lionel also identifies himself as a womanist due to being inspired by his mother and the sacrifices black women make daily. To that end, he advises both Black males and females to
abandon their egos and the distraction they create, embrace and immerse in what feeds them, and be intentional. Further, he encourages mentoring/modeling and shares,

I think the idea of a mentor always boils down to people thinking that it’s somebody who is further along than you and I think sometimes it’s just people who are modeling behavior. I think that's why your social groups are important because you all model each other’s behavior.

Interview Findings

To acclimate participants to the interview process each was asked to tell the story of them and what makes them who they are today. This question was intentionally left very open to allow for participants’ most salient identities to emerge. Most participants began by defining themselves in terms of family relations, age, racial identity, and place of origin. A few examples of such lead-ins are listed below.

- Yogi stated, “I'm an African-American male, 45 years old. I have two older brothers, so I'm the youngest. [I] grew up in a stable middle-class home with my parents who are still happily married.”

- Eric stated, “What makes me? Well, I think my parents make me. My mother is African [and] my father was American. My father was an academic [and] my mother is very hard-working. I grew up in this household in Massachusetts.”

- Danny stated, “I am currently the father of one son, that I know of. His name is Danny Jr. I'm married to Angie whom I met as an undergrad at Northern Illinois University.”

- Reggie stated, “Let’s see, [I was] born in Cleveland [and] moved around a lot as a kid. [I attended] six different high schools in four different states [and] landed in Frankfort, Kentucky my senior year in high school.”
Lionel stated, “Okay, my name is Lionel, I am 31 years old, 32 in a few weeks. I'm originally from Birmingham, Alabama.”

The above responses show that participants’ salient identities were tied to demographic descriptors such as race, age, and location. An additional salience in these responses was family dynamics.

Seven themes emerged from the interview and inventory data and showed that participants: (1) exhibited slight differences related to preferred problem solving styles; (2) practiced self-reflection and learned to modified their behaviors; (3) regarded strong work ethic and successful outcomes as mediators of race issues; (4) contended with authenticity concerns; (5) valued being connected to and engaged in networks of support; (6) intentionally cultivated positive personal and professional relationships; and (7) based their satisfaction with life in part on factors related to money, health, and work. Table 4 illustrates the alignment of research questions to interview questions and subsequent themes. The table further provides an overview of the way that the results will be presented in the remainder of this chapter. To that end, first the research questions will be answered, then supporting statements from participant narratives will be provided followed by a discussion of the aligning theme(s). Although Table 4 shows a crossover of themes between research questions three and four, each theme will only be discussed once under a given research question. This is being done in an effort to avoid redundancies; nevertheless, each theme will be mentioned under each of its respective research question.
### Table 4: Alignment of Research Questions, Interview Questions, and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Themes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ 1:</strong> How do Black men who are more adaptive or more innovative perceive and describe their experience with upward social mobility?</td>
<td>IQ 2: How did you get to where you are now? …Use previous answer as probe material</td>
<td>T 1: Slight differences in approaches to problem solving and change management respective to participants more adaptive or more innovative preferred style present, with greater delineation apparent, based on individual sub scores.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>IQ 3: Let’s talk a bit more about the actual processes that you’ve followed: a. What steps, if any, have you followed in setting goals for yourself? b. How have you gone about reaching your goals?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>IQ 4: What factors (favorable or unfavorable) have been most significant to your process?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>RQ 2:</strong> How do Black men analyze and resolve key life-changing moments that have the potential to impact their pursuit of upward social mobility?</td>
<td>IQ 5: Think back to a moment or moments in your life when you’ve had to make a decision that changed the path you were on…share with me what you were experiences, feeling, and thinking and how you got through it.</td>
<td>T 2: Self-reflection and modifications to behavior, communication approaches, and expectations become routine in the pursuit of social mobility for Black men.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>IQ 6: As you reflect over these moments and the overall path that has brought you to where you are in life at this point, I want to talk about risks and by that I simply mean times when you’ve had to press on while being unsure about how things would turn out. With that in mind, what has worked really well for you when dealing with risks? What would you rule if you could?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>RQ 3:</strong> What behaviors do Black men agree to perform and accept as imperative to gaining awareness and access to upward social mobility?</td>
<td>IQ 7: Revisiting the idea of goals, you said….is there anything else that has been important to you to be a part of? What behaviors did you personally have to do to contribute to…your educational, career and/or community outcomes?</td>
<td>T 2: Self-reflection and modifications to behavior, communication approaches, and expectations become routine in the pursuit of social mobility for Black men.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>IQ 8: How did you think your family and friends perceived you as you exhibited these behaviors? What feedback did you receive and from whom?</td>
<td>T 3: Strong work ethic and successful outcomes are perceived mitigators of racial inequities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ 4:</strong> What considerations of people, context, content, and methods do Black men make in planning their approach to upward social mobility?</td>
<td>IQ 9: In terms of relationships, who has proved valuable for the sake of reaching the goals you established for yourself?</td>
<td>T 4: Concerns with authenticity, levied both internally and externally, impact identity development and social interactions.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>IQ 10: In terms of resources, what things proved valuable for the sake of reaching the goals you established for yourself? Were there changes in your values over time? Tell me more about that.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>IQ 11: What advice would you give to other Black males in pursuit of upward social mobility?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>IQ 12: In terms of lifestyle and family, are you on track with your expectations? Are you where you want to be? (probe about why they think they are or aren’t)</td>
<td>T 5: Connectivity to and engagement in networks of support that reflect and support the unique needs of Black men.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>T 6: The intentional cultivation of positive personal and professional relationships enhances understanding of self and others within social context towards social mobility.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>T 7: Within the context of what participants value, factors regarding money, health, and work influence their satisfaction with life.</td>
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Research question 1: How do Black men who are more adaptive or more innovative perceive and describe their experience with social mobility?

Research question one asked how black men who are more adaptive or more innovative perceive and describe their experience with social mobility. Per the results derived from the KAI inventory and supporting narratives from the participants’ interviews, those who are more adaptive described their experiences with social mobility in the same way as those who were more innovative. For instance, Eric who is more adaptive described his experiences as a matter of good fortune by stating, “I feel that I have had many fortunate things happen to me in my life.” Similarly, Yogi who is more innovative acknowledges some challenges along the way but ultimately resorts to a favorable description in sharing, “I have had a fairly successful career and one or two setbacks, but I think we all get knocked down, but learn to get back up and keep moving and overall, I'd say I've had a pretty blessed and charmed life.” Another example would be Ned who is more adaptive and perceives the influence of family as instrumental to his social mobility as evinced by his statement, “I think having loving parents has always been, I think for me personally, that’s the foundation and that actually still is what kinda pushes me today. In the same way. Nicholas who is more innovative highlights family within his top three influences on his social mobility saying, “So that's kinda the second thing you know just faith would be number one and the second thing is really family, legacy that type of thing.” These examples show that there was not much disparity between their descriptions and perceptions of experiences with social mobility. However, there was a difference in attitudes which according to the schema falls within cognitive affect and influences motivation. Participants who were on the more adaptive side of the continuum expressed an attitude of frustration which may be a
byproduct of the psychological costs of behaving outside of one’s preferred style, also known as coping behavior (Kirton, 2013). However, they remained motivated by other elements of cognitive affect such as needs, values, and belief system and thus were resolved to continue going with the flow. Indicators of coping behavior and consolation were not apparent in participants who were on the more innovative side of the continuum.

As indicated in Chapter 3, participants’ preferred problem solving styles were determined via the KAI inventory. Their overall KAI scores ranged from 78 to 125 points. There were three participants on the more adaptive end of the continuum, one mid scorers, and five on the more innovative end. The mean score of the participants was 101.2, which is 3.2 points higher than the mean for men, and 6.2 points higher than the general population mean. It must be noted that four of the participants yielded scores that were statistically unreliable according to the criteria outlined by the KAI manual and therefore have been excluded from Table 5 and discussions that pertain to problem solving preferences. Additionally, one participant opted not to complete the inventory. These factors left a total of nine participants with interpretable scores to be used for data analysis as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: KAI Scores and Problem Solving Preferences (N = 9)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Preferred style</th>
<th>Total score</th>
<th>Idea generation (SO)</th>
<th>Methodology (E)</th>
<th>Management of structure (RG)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population mean</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Adaptive</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ned</td>
<td>Adaptive</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yogi</td>
<td>Innovative</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nonetheless, the KAI scores support the narrative descriptions provided by the participants. Below are a few examples of how this manifested in the lives of the participants.

Lionel, an executive magazine editor, had an overall KAI score of 125 which puts him on the higher end of being more innovative; however, his efficiency sub score is right at the mean and tends towards being more adaptive in his methodology. In considering occupations, being a magazine editor tends towards the more innovative end of the continuum as Lionel’s total score indicates; however, evidence of the more adaptive efficiency score is seen as he describes his path towards his goal of working for a magazine. His approach was methodical and his pursuit of experience accorded with everything that he believed to be relevant about working in the magazine industry. According to Lionel,

“Every sort of position that I’ve had was to get more experience that takes me to that path and then also collectively gathering the skills necessary to perform well once I got there. So I know how to shoot a camera, I know how to write a story, I know how to edit, I know how to [do] even minute details like to style a shoot and even do makeup. I’ve like been very rigid about, or very intentional about learning whatever details I need
to know to be successful in that field and to be able to kind of assess talent in that field and to get the best productivity out of other people.”

Ned, a senior procurement coordinator, who scored in the more adaptive range with a 78, had a methodology score closer to the mean but tending towards the more innovative side. Hence, when difficulties arose with maintaining his home, instead of choosing to improve the situation by making better decisions in the house, he chose to improve the situation by leaving the house to return home to his parents’ house.

“So the life-changing decision was made to come back home to hit the reset button so to speak. Like I said, the factors were finances and even safety because mold was starting to pop up and grow on the inside of the house so it was a lot of different factors. I knew the most logical thing for me to do was to come back home for a while.”

Sampson, an engineer, falls on the more innovative end of the spectrum with a more adaptive methodology score. As he speaks of trying to elevate his family, his role is anchoring as he reflects on his means of doing so. He stated the he was, “just trying to lead by example so everybody kinda breaks those cycles of just, I don’t know, for lack of a better word, just bad living.” Danny has an middle score of 93 points with a more innovative score in his management of structure sub score. As an admissions counselor, he works on the periphery and speaks of the need resolve his availability with accessibility. He expressed, “I got to be present with them, available… accessible, that's what I'm trying to say. Accessible, because you can kinda burn yourself out ‘cause people will, they'll kill you if you allow them to.”

Timothy, an executive pastry chef has a more innovative score with a more adaptive methodology sub score. This is evident in his reflection of racism and work ethic in which he stated the following:
“I never thought that I didn’t get something, or something happened to me because of racism. It could have been, but I would always say that it must be because this wasn’t good enough, so I worked on that and I always said that I’m gonna let my work speak for itself because once that comes into play it’s like nobody can tell you no. Like they can't deny your work.”

As can be seen from the examples above, the overall KAI scores do not tell the complete story. More adaptive and more innovative behaviors within the context of participant sub scores support their narratives regarding problem solving approaches, identity, and decision making. Hence, the narratives of all participants were analyzed with the sub scores in mind.

As stated, participants who are more adaptive or more innovative problem solvers perceived and described their experiences with social mobility similarly. In attempting to recall and articulate their experiences, regardless of problem solving preferences most participants highlighted school and family as catalysts. In examining the responses regarding school, the influence was seen as favorable regardless of whether it was a four-year institution or a vocational school, and irrespective of whether the individual graduated. Lionel, the most innovative problem solver of the participants with the exception of his methodology sub score attributes his trajectory to school; however, he did not graduate. Nonetheless, when asked to expound upon how he got to where he is now he responded,

I would say more or less that [it was] going off to school. I attended Tennessee State, it’s a HBCU in Nashville, which is like a hub for HBCUs and just down the street on Jefferson Street there is Meharry Medical College and Fisk University. So just being able to live in Nashville [and] be on my own for the first time, and just overcome challenges. I faced challenges with funding. [I] did the whole stop and work and go back for a couple
of semesters, and stop and work and then just do that for a few years until I was able to get a job in my career, which was I was a journalism major.

Yogi is also a more innovative problem solver with a more adaptive methodology sub score and he had a somewhat similar experience in that there was a hiatus in his college career during which time he worked as well. He explained,

I’d say from a career perspective you know I started out going to college, [I] got a couple years in college and I was actually working for a large international company and they promoted me while I was still in college. I thought wow, with as much money as I’m making and the fact they had confidence in me to promote me, I thought why do I need to continue this college thing? So I dropped out of college and pressed on with work.

However, Yogi later spoke of getting to a point where he had to complete his degree in order to position himself for continued upward mobility. Hence, he returned and graduated. The idea of school as a means of positioning oneself to be socially mobile was also apparent in Sampson’s response. Like Lionel and Yogi, he’s a more innovative problem solver with a more adaptive methodology sub score. As a first generation college goer, he admits to being driven by a desire to improve the status of his family. He states,

Prior to myself we haven't had anyone graduate from college. So, I’m essentially, probably the only college graduate in my family. So the biggest thing for me right now is just trying to elevate my whole family, and it's probably an impossible task but the biggest thing for me is [that] you gotta start somewhere. So, just trying to show my family as a whole, it’s a better way.

Seeing college as a means to making a better way was a sentiment seemingly shared by Tyrone as well, who is a more adaptive problem solver with consistent sub scores. In other words, his
total score, as well as, all three of his sub scores reflect his preferred problem solving style being more adaptive. Although he mentions that family could not afford to send him to college, he was determined to go. He shared,

I went to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on a full ride scholarship. I received between 6 to 8 scholarships my senior year of high school, half of which were for all four years. Whatever scholarships didn’t cover financial aid did in the form of grants. And I went to school and received a bachelors of science in advertising and I thought that's what I was going to do.

A four-year institution was not the path for Timothy who is a more innovative problem solver with a more adaptive sub score in methodology. He asserts, “Always knew I wanted to become a Chef. I was always interested in food so after high school I went to culinary school at Kendall College.”

The influence of family is woven throughout participant responses. Eric, a more adaptive problem solver with a more innovative methodology sub score speaks of being an academic and to the influence of academia in his household stating that, “I didn't always know but since my father was an academic [it] just seemed to [be] a natural path to go on to college and from college to go on to graduate school…” Although this aligns with his more adaptive total score, evidence of his more innovative methodology score is seen in him sharing, “So I went on to grad school and I was still kinda resisting this idea that I was just on a path to try to become a professor…” and in his engagement with his various art interests as he expressed, “I feel like I have a creative side, I don’t get to use it necessarily as much as I want to, but I think that is important to have that space to be creative.” Ned perceives his experiences with social mobility as very much driven and supported by having a strong family structure. He states, “I think for
me personally, that’s the foundation and that actually still is what kinda pushes me today. Just having that family, that strong family foundation, it really helped me to get to where I am today.”

Ned has a more adaptive approach to problem solving; however, his reliance on family is apparent in an example of his more innovative methodology sub score. He described a scenario in which finances and the upkeep of his house “had just become a headache”, so he made the decision to walk away from the house and allow it to go into foreclosure and return home to living with his parents to reestablish himself. This is an example of abandoning the current structure or system that was in place for a different structure or system altogether.

Research question one explored how Black men who are more adaptive or more innovative perceive and describe their experience with social mobility. Per the results, they described their experiences with social mobility in the same way. However, the attitudes of those who were more adaptive demonstrated frustration and hinted towards coping behavior.

Nevertheless, theme one emerged from the data associated with this research question through an aggregate of two categories: problem-solving and behavior. Additionally, theme one, as discussed below is represented in the cognitive effect portion of the conceptual framework.

**Theme 1: Slight differences in approaches to problem solving and change management respective to their more adaptive or more innovative preferred style were present, with greater delineation apparent, based on individual sub scores.**

Problem solvers tend towards being more adaptive or more innovative in idea generation, work efficiency, and conformity to rules and groups. These areas represent the sub scores of the KAI inventory and can provide deeper insight into the preferences of individuals beyond what the total score reveals. Although a discussion of sub scores was only statistically warranted for one participant, Nicholas, nuances related to sub scores were present for a number of the
participants. With this in mind, and considering the qualitative methodology of this study and the researcher as the instrument of interpretation, she opted to discuss such nuances as part of the findings and as a means of exploring multiple meanings.

In considering idea generation, the participants’ scores were consistent with the means of their total scores. Hence, those with more adaptive total scores yielded fewer, more logical ideas when problem solving, whereas those with more innovative total scores proliferated a vaster array of ideas. For instance, one of the more adaptive participants was determined to attend a four-year university, but did not have the financial means. Nonetheless, all of the options he explored were related to the norm for financial aid options such as scholarships, grants, and loans. Conversely, one of the more innovative participants experienced a similar financially challenging situation; but in addition to pursuing the normal means, he also considered a variety of work options which included taking semesters off from school to work and earn money to return to school.

Work efficiency was an area where differences were seen between total scores and sub scores. An example would be one of the more innovative participants that has a much more adaptive methodology score. Although his work calls for creativity, he spoke to being very detail-oriented and methodical in addressing the problems that arise in creating the products or delivering great service. He also spoke to this being his mode of operandi for building his skill set. On the other hand, one of the more adaptive participants had a more innovative methodology score. This was reflected in his problem solving regarding the troubles with being a homeowner. Instead of opting for improvement options, he opted for a complete change and walked away from the house completely.
Rule and group conformity was an area where most of the participants’ sub scores reinforced their total score. However, one of the more innovative participants had a more adaptive rule/group score. As an entrepreneur, this was apparent in the way that he forged relationships with mentors and yielded to their advice and guidance in problem solving for his business.

Analyzing and Resolving Key Life Changing Moments

**Research question 2: How do Black men analyze and resolve key life-changing moments that have the potential to impact their pursuit of social mobility?**

Seeking to understand how black men analyze and resolve key life-changing moments that had the potential to impact their social mobility was the intent of research question two. According to many of the participants, decisions they made under such circumstances required engaging in self-reflection, being adaptable to change, family influence, and exercising faith. Their accounts supported the creation of themes two and six which describe participants’ experiences with the practice of self-reflection and behavior modification, as well as, intentional cultivation of relationships, respectively. Evidence of such practices is seen in the experience shared by Nicholas who spoke highly of the influence of faith in his life. To that end, he conveyed his experience with being laid off from what he described as the best job he had ever had up to that point, and the conversation that followed with his wife that left him bothered but ultimately repositioned for more progressive social mobility. He starts,

So we go out to dinner and my mind is just racing, like you know what. am. I. going. to. do. So she asked me a question at dinner, she said, “Are you excited?” Now, it's her birthday and I don't want to upset the situation ’cause I want her to have a good time and I don't want her birthday to be focused on me. So I just said no, I'm not excited, I'm
hopeful, I have some anxiety, but excited is not the word that I would use. So after that, for two weeks it bothered me that she said that, how insensitive could you be? Why would you ask somebody who just got laid off, ‘are you excited?’ I mean it just bothered me literally for two weeks. And at the end of two weeks I said man, she's right. I should be excited because I can go back to that dreamer, I can do or be whatever I want to be when I grow up, so to speak.

Danny, in considering self-reflection and exercising of faith expressed, “I look through kinda like this lens of church, spirituality, Christianity and such. So when I look at my life and evaluate things, I feel like where I am is divinely orchestrated.” Self-reflection, faith and adaptability proved necessary when he became a victim of identity fraud and his social mobility was compromised. Danny explained,

I had to dig out of a hole that I didn't create for myself while carrying my wife who is unemployed, well not carrying, supporting, providing for my wife and my son with what felt like being at a significant disadvantage. I am less of a risk taker than I once was, ‘cause I feel like any decisions that I make don't just affect me.”

Self-reflection and family influence were two factors that set Reggie on a new path when he got into legal trouble as a teenager. It was his grandmother and mother who came to his financial rescue. His grandmother passed shortly thereafter and according to Reggie he made a vow to himself “not to dishonor her by getting into trouble and do more to help people the way she helped me, and so I just had to really change my whole style of life.”

An overarching stereotype presented as a key life changing moment for Yohan when he was told by his basketball coach that the only way he would make it is playing basketball. According to Yohan, “he said there's no way you'll make it otherwise if you don't play
basketball…I looked in the mirror and I told myself from that point forward, I have to prove him wrong.” Yohan decided to turn being told something negative about himself into motivation towards something positive. As a result of his self-reflection and resilience to-date he has served as a city councilman in his local area for four years and was recently reelected. Furthermore, out of 10 councilmen he is the only Black person, and the first to be elected in well over 20 years.

These four examples demonstrate the decision-making practices that proved crucial for participants in navigating a few key life-changing moments. Research questions two sought to exploring how Black men analyze and resolve key life-changing moments and the results revealed self-reflection, being adaptable, conceding to family influence and exercising faith as salient factors. However, these were not presented in participant narratives as mutually exclusive, nor should they be regarded as an exhaustive list. Nonetheless, theme two emerged from the data associated with this question and through an aggregate of four categories: self, behavior, communication, and manage expectations. Additionally, theme two is represented in the behavior, cognitive affect, and cognitive resources sections of the conceptual framework.

**Theme 2: Self-reflection and modifications to behavior, communication approaches, and expectations become routine in the pursuit of social mobility for black men.**

The need for regular self-reflection resonated through the shared experiences of the participants. Although master-narratives imply the need to assimilate, and at least one participant agreed, many rejected the notion of assimilating which coincides with CRT (Pelzer, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). Instead, participants acknowledged the need for evolution, a term they offered in explaining their modified behaviors, communication approaches, and expectations in pursuit of social mobility. Evolving spoke to their need to grow and develop in ways that made them more palatable in diverse social settings, and more
specifically in work settings. Modifications to behavior in many instances meant changing the way participants expressed themselves, dressed, and engaged with others. For instance, expressions of passion and enthusiasm were often perceived as aggression. Thus, understanding the need to managing perceptions, participants reported learning to take cues from their environment and curb their expressions of enthusiasm as necessary so as not to unintentionally block opportunities. Participants also were aware of the way people responded to their outer appearance from style of hair to selection of clothing. There is a tendency towards perceiving Black men as menacing or less than professional based on their appearance. Interestingly, one participant mentioned being stereotyped not only by police officers, but even within the Black community in his early days of wearing dreadlocks despite him maintaining them very well and not having a violent disposition. Additionally, changes to social circles proved to be another necessary modification whether it meant starting to socialize and participate in activities that were previously foreign (i.e. galas, golf outings, etc.) or eradicating nonproductive individuals from your dealings. Many of the aforementioned tactics occurred organically as the motivation and intention towards becoming socially mobile strengthened.

Communicating effectively is a skill set that serves to benefit everyone regardless of race, gender, religion, etc. Nonetheless, communication can be hindered by antecedent bias or stereotypes. Mass media has promoted the idea of Black men as lazy, unintelligent, unintelligible, and threatening, an image that makes it close to impossible for them to enter into unprejudiced social interactions. To that end, the majority of participants in this study have been diligent in ensuring that their vernacular does not serve as an immediate distraction to their messages.
In further considering participants’ self-reflection, it was clear that many had to become adept at managing expectations. When asked about their level of contentment with life, many expressed being fairly content but also having reached that by adjusting their expectations. For instance, a couple of participants had to move back home with their parents to regroup. They acknowledged that it could be viewed as having failed, but they really saw it as a means to a better end. This optimistic outlook was common for many of the participant as they interpreted the challenges they faced as learning experiences and adjusted their expectations accordingly.

Performed and Accepted Behaviors

**Research question 3: What behaviors do Black men agree to perform and accept as imperative to gaining awareness and access to social mobility?**

Research question three asked about the behaviors that black men agree to perform and accept as necessary to gaining awareness and access to social mobility. According to the participants, self-reflection and modifications to behavior, communication approaches, and expectations have become routine in their pursuit of social mobility. In addition to this, they believed that the ability to be or become socially mobile was possible through hard work and successful results. Nevertheless, this is also an area in which participants expressed concerns about authenticity in identity development and social interactions. To that end, the stories that were shared informed themes two, three, and four. Theme two captured self-reflective practices and behavior, three promoted having a strong work ethic, and four captured the authenticity concerns that participants reported contending with from multiple sources.

Generally speaking, majority of the participants contextualized this discussion in terms of work and family. Work identities were based on specific titles, having a strong work ethic, and putting forth your best effort. Family identities stemmed from the influence of certain members,
exhibiting a sense of responsibility and loyalty. Nevertheless, in describing their social interactions in either of these circles, participants’ concerns with authenticity were apparent. Many spoke of being perceived in a way that they felt contradicted who they truly are and the image they sought to project. In this regard, most equated such discrepancies as challenging to social mobility while at least one other, although acknowledging they exist, did not see that as a connection to their social mobility. According to Timothy, an executive pastry chef in a major Las Vegas casino hotel, “my main thing in life is letting your work speak for itself”. In his position he often gets calls to provide employment references and he asserts, “your work ethic proceeds you no matter what.” Even when he’s been denied opportunities or promotions, although he knew other factors could be at play, he attributed it only to his work outcomes.

But I would always say that it must be because this wasn't good enough so I worked on that and I always said that I’m gonna let my work speak for itself because once that comes into play it's like nobody can tell you no. Like they can't deny your work.

Sampson, an engineer, in acknowledging the pressures he’s felt being the first person in his family to go to college attributes his mobility to his work ethic, “I mean just my work ethic I’ve always had, I believe I've always had a pretty strong work ethic”. Similarly, Yogi, a director of Finance and Administration speaks to “having a work product that is superior to others, don't turn in crappy work you know and if you gotta stay late and you gotta do what you need to do”. Although having a strong work ethics was offered as critical in the pursuit of social mobility, certain behavior and communication modifications were deemed imperative. Yogi put it plainly, You have to assimilate. You know, it just is what it is. I've even said at times that you know there is a you know there’s a work Yogi, and there’s a home Yogi. They are,
they're not the same. And so, in the office as much as I would you know like to be 100% my natural self in the office you know that’s just not gonna happen, it's just not you know conducive you know to the environments that I work in, and you know I need to be able to relate on their level, and be able to communicate in the way that they communicate.

Along those same lines, when Reggie began his education career he recalls being excited to advance professionally and help students make gains. As he pursued his goals he was determined not to sell out; he said, “I’m selling out by changing who I am, changing how I dress, changing how I speak, changing aspects of my character that would automatically identify me.” However, through self-reflection he later realized that change was inevitable if he wanted to reach his goals. In the words of Reggie,

I realized it's not about selling out, it's about expanding and in order to reach my goal I have to be able to communicate effectively with different people without certain distractions. And if I want them to get my clear message, that’s exactly what I have to do. Being able to speak to these people and see how they respond, and I can see how they respond when I use a different type of language or dress a different type of way. People just respond to your outer appearance or what you sound like first, so I have to make sure that that's not a distraction so that my message is clear.

The ability to communicate clearly was also seen as a challenge to Darryl who describes himself as passionate and enthusiastic, qualities that were lost in translation. Instead he was being perceive as angry and aggressive which was something he had to self-reflect upon and he shared,

And the thing about it was, I never even really understood why were people so intimidated because it wasn't like I was a violent person, it wasn't like I had a violent past
or anything but I guess my approach was too aggressive for them to get the actual message that I was trying to say.

As mentioned above, the saliency of family interactions was also clear. From a responsibility standpoint Darryl embraces a gendered societal role in fueling his need behave in a way that permits awareness and access, and ultimately progressive social mobility. He states,

I'm a man and I have to take care of not just me, but I have a whole lot of people behind me that I have to take care and support too, you know. It’s people who depend on me so I try to; you know I just try to do my best.

Nicholas, a self-proclaimed dreamer in becoming progressively socially mobile presented a slightly different spin on interactions and influences of family members. He acknowledged the desire to have their love and to be influential in their lives, but expressed concern about their potential to taint his dream due to his love and admiration for them. So from the perspective of knowing how he’s being perceived he shares, “in a way that I don't want to know, because I don't want the burden of their expectations or their fear.”

On the other hand, there was also the mention of misperceptions from family member that put a strain on social interactions. Participants gave disclaimers regarding their families as they prepared to provide insight about their interactions and influences. Having achieved a certain level of success in being socially mobile, Yohan shares,

A lot of my family members all they really know is their world if that makes sense. And so you know so when I come back home and visit, I’m looked at as a snob so to speak. And it’s totally, and the thing about it is, it's totally not like… I'm the same person it’s totally not like what they think.

Yogi expressed a similar disconnect with members of his extended family in sharing,
So my family so my parents were you know solid middle-class all the good stuff, but the extended family was you know certainly impoverished. So I'd say the you know vast majority of both sides are well below you know the poverty line, and so they always viewed my parents as somehow thinking that you know they were better than them. Which my parents certainly you know did not try to you know, I don't think it was ever intentional but you know it's just the way people perceived them and felt about them.

Keeping with the need for self-reflection, modifications to behaviors, and authenticity in identity and socialization Marcus confessed, “I've been lost for a long time” and acknowledged the changes he has made to improve his social mobility.

A lot of people I had to let go because when I hang around [them] I find myself in the same situation of not doing anything, and by me hanging out with them and not doing anything, I find myself not doing anything also, you know.

All of the participants agreed that there are some generally accepted and performed behaviors that have aided their pursuit of social mobility. Per the examples above, self-reflection has been imperative to not only making necessary changes, but also reconciling their authenticity concerns. Research question three sought to explore the behaviors Black men agree to perform and accept as imperative to gaining awareness and access to social mobility. According to the results, self-reflection and modifications to behavior, communication approaches, and expectations have become routine in their pursuit of social mobility. Additionally, hard work and successful outcomes was key. Nonetheless, themes two, three, and four emerged from the data associated with this question. Theme two was discussed under research question two. Theme three emerged through an aggregate of four categories: identity, success, motivation, and opportunity. Further, it aligns with the behavior, cognitive resource, and cognitive affect
portions of the conceptual framework. Theme four emerged through an aggregate of two categories: identity and perception. Likewise, it is represented in the cognitive effect, cognitive affect, behavior, and social environment.

**Theme 2: Self-reflection and modifications to behavior, communication approaches, and expectations become routine in the pursuit of social mobility for black men.**

See discussion under RQ 2.

**Theme 3: Strong work ethic and successful outcomes are perceived mitigators of racial inequities.**

The intersection of race and gender for this demographic group exposes implicit biases that can block their awareness and access regarding social mobility opportunities. Participants were aware of such challenges; however, there was a resounding belief amongst them that if they exhibited a strong work ethic and produced good results, they would be socially mobile. Welburn (2016) refers to this mindset as dual consciousness, when individuals believe in their personal agency in the face of structural inequality. This is not to be confused with double consciousness as discussed in earlier chapters, a term that W.E.B. Du Bois used to explain the identity conflict/struggles that accompany being a member of a marginalized group and seeking to reconcile an internal sense of self with external perceptions while actively engaged in a system that been historically ostracized those identities (Banks & Hughes, 2013; Eze, 2011; Simmons, 2014). Nonetheless, both dual and double consciousness serve to explain why participants understood race to be a factor but opted not to consider it as a salient factor in their social mobility experiences.

Although participants promoted hard work and producing good results, there was an underlying thought of a popular narrative in the Black community of having to do twice as much,
and/or be twice as good to get the same consideration as non-minorities. Participants spoke of understanding the need to work longer hours and take on greater workloads to glean the similar benefits as their non-minority coworkers. Interestingly, in delving into the experiences of the participants the expression “unapologetically black” arose, which in and of itself seems to denote an expectation of ashamedness with being Black, which these participants were not. They expressed a clear understanding of who they are often perceived to be within the context of society as a whole; however, they share a kinship with their heritage and a sense of responsibility to preserve the rich culture. Generally speaking, this group of participants has tended towards strategies of transcending race and racial stereotypes that are apparent across the themes that have been discussed thus far. This includes a willingness to work harder than the expectation, engaging with diverse networks, building knowledge and skill through various types of learning, and demonstrating resilience.

**Theme 4: Concerns with authenticity, levied both internally and externally, impact identity development and social interactions.**

Keeping it real and selling out are aphorisms that participants became accustomed to hearing as they actively pursued social mobility. Both were levied as pejorative terms with the former referring to remaining true to oneself and upbringing and not pretending to be more refined, and the latter referring to one who compromises their personal beliefs, integrity, and values for personal advancement. Although participants did not view themselves in this manner, some were often perceived by friends and family members in this way and as thinking they were better than others. Participants spoke of attempting to explain the need for evolution, in other words, growing and developing in ways that allowed them access to diverse social networks and the opportunity to circumvent overarching stereotypes. However, such attempts were met with
resistance, or as one participant described it being like talking to a brick wall. In some cases, participants had to make the decision to disassociate with certain individuals for the sake of strengthening and being confident in their identities.

Given these points, and in an effort to contend with authenticity concerns, participants learned to practice impression management. Impression management involves the intentional process that people employ to control the way they are perceived, or impressions others form about them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). So, in using strategies for impression management an increase in perceived likability, competence, and appeal is anticipated (Spong & Kamau, 2012). Thus, in an attempt to be well received in the social networks that had the greatest impact on becoming socially mobile, participants learned to adapt their mode of operation. As one participant explained, there are two versions of him, a work version and a home version of which the two are not the same because certain aspects of his home self would not be conducive to operating in work circles. This does not mean that there is anything wrong with his home self; however, in a professional setting certain characteristics can be misconstrued as affirmations of racial stereotypes. To that end, impression management research has revealed worries from underrepresented population group members about participating in authentic social exchanges with non-minority group members (Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010; Brondolo et al., 2012). Thus, participants are very conscious about navigating the diverse social environments in which they live and work, and understand the effect a misstep in any of them can impose on their social mobility efforts.

Considerations of People, Context, Content, and Methods

**Research question 4: What considerations of people, context, content, and methods do Black men make in planning their approach to social mobility?**
Research question four asked about the considerations of people, context, and methods black men make in planning their approach to social mobility. Per the results derived from the semi-structured interview and the QOLI participants consider: money, health, work, responsibility for family and community, relationship building, the need to operate outside of comfort zone, trade-offs made, discerning advice received, education, informal learning, as well as the timing of opportunities. Tyrone represents an example of considerations of health with regards to his social mobility. In seeking to improve upon his career and lifestyle, Tyrone spoke about being intentional with his weight management program stating, “I just wanted to avoid different health trends that I noticed in my family as well as you know hypertension, diabetes, high blood pressure, all of that.” These are diseases that are disproportionately higher in Black communities. Nevertheless, considerations focused heavily on networking and being intentional in cultivating positive personal and professional relationships. Although Yogi admits to having difficulty cultivating relationship with superiors, he understands the negative impact this can have on his social mobility. He shared,

You know so I'm not the ‘hey let's go out golfing this weekend’ type and I realized that that is a part of the story that determines the move to the next step in the process. And I know it's a part because I've had people flat out tell me.

In Eric’s opinion, he has made a practice of treating people well and believes that this has worked to his advantage. He advises to, “do your best to cultivate positive relationships, to cultivate positive relationships. And particularly positive relationships with people you feel like you can trust.” Trust in relationships was also echoed by Tyrone who mentioned that, “Talking to close trusted friends about different things that were happening has definitely helped me.” To that end he speaks to the need for “surrounding yourself with people who will lift you up who
will encourage you, people who understand what it is you're trying to do and respect that and are willing to help as need be.” Similarly, Reggie makes a delineation regarding the types of relationships that you should cultivate. He says, “I think one of the most important things is really the whole idea of networking;” however, he goes a step further and speaks to the idea of understanding how you know people and the type of capital you have with them. Understanding which relationships to foster is an area he feels is lacking with Black males. He states, “a lot of things that we’re not being taught as Black males that I really learned as far as in the corporate world was just different aspects of how to build relationships and understand who people are.”

Participants also highlighted modeling and mentoring as a means in considering their approach to social mobility. As Marcus says, “identify a person who's doing what you want to do and try to establish a relationship.” Likewise, Yohan speaks to having long-term relationships that have influenced his mobility in sharing,

I have some long-term mentors that I've had since I was in college. I’ve kept those relationships, [a] couple of guys that have been like father figures to me since I been up here.

Some participants reported that the approach that they have taken in becoming progressively socially mobile has been frustrating and unsettling at times. One example is Danny and his pursuit of pastorhood. Although advised to pursue higher education to improve his candidacy, it has not yielded the results that he had hoped. He confessed,

So that's frustrating. Even more so now that I have the degree and I’m even working on a doctorate degree I feel more qualified and when I kind of take survey of some of the people who have been given the opportunity to be a pastor I get frustrated … I feel like I can do a greater job than some of these folks that are out here.
Another example would be Eric who has found himself immersed in a professional community that does not fully understand nor provide supports for the unique needs of Black men. He admits that in this place he has,

Been more aware of being seen as black first and a person second. And that's not always a bad thing, it’s not always in a negative way, sometimes it’s in a way when someone goes out of their way to be nice to me. But there's still this unsettling feeling.

As previously mentioned, the QOLI was also instrumental in understanding the considerations participants have in their social mobility pursuits and their general satisfaction with life. Based on the overall satisfaction, three individuals indicated a low satisfaction with life, eight had an average satisfaction, and three had high satisfaction as shown in Table 6. Individuals with low satisfaction tend toward feeling unhappy and unfulfilled, can be more pessimistic, typically don’t achieve their goals, and have difficulty finding rewarding relationships and experiences. These individuals may also experience more health issues than others. Average satisfaction indicates a generally happy and content individual who feel that their lives have meaning and purpose and are rewarding. High satisfaction indicates individuals who are extremely happy and content with life, regularly engaged in positive and rewarding environments and view life as rich and meaningful. Both average and high satisfaction individuals tend to be successful with meeting their goals and in general good health.

Although the group as a whole was generally satisfied with life, all but one participant identified areas of dissatisfaction. In order of reoccurrence, those areas and number of individuals were as follows: money (n = 6), health (n = 5), work (n = 4), community (n = 3), children (n = 3), helping (n = 2), goals-&-values (n = 2), love (n = 2), neighborhood (n = 1),
play (n = 1), and self-esteem (n = 1). Participants were asked, via email, to expound on reasons that make these areas dissatisfying. Timothy, an executive pastry chef, indicated dissatisfaction with ‘work’ for the following reasons:

Employees don't care, most don't have culinary training, more on the job training... this cause issues when trying to change menu items, learn different techniques.

Work/life balance is a struggle at times... putting in long hours to make sure things are done correctly, clients’ needs are taken care of, takes away from quality time with my family... at times I worry that when I die, all they can say is that I worked a lot.

Finding qualified managers and employees is a strain…

Nathan, a communications specialist, indicated dissatisfaction with ‘children’ for the following reasons:

I would say work and growing a business definitely gets in the way of this area.

My dissatisfaction is not with children itself but more of being in position to have one. Trying to pursue goals in today's economy is a little rougher than previous times which may result in more time to accomplish.

Ned, a senior procurement coordinator, indicated dissatisfaction with ‘goal-&-values, money, and community’ for the following reasons:

Goals & Values - As we’ve discussed, walking away from my home over a year ago really threw a monkey wrench in my goal setting. But its back on track in case you were wondering.
Money - Being back home, I was under the impression that I will be able to save more money. What that in essence makes me do is become more disciplined and aware of my financial goals.

Community - The Black Community is in shambles at this moment with no relief in sight. We are at the bottom of the barrel in comparison to other races of people and that concerns me. Always in search of a better way for me personally and as a people.

Table 6: QOLI Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Score*</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Areas of Dissatisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Children, Play, Love, Self-esteem, Money, Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ned</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Community, Goals &amp; Values, Money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yogi</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Health, Creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyrone</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicholas</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Helping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampson</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Work, Neighborhood, Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danny</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Money, Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timothy</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yohan</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darryl</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research question four sought to understand the considerations of people, context, content, and methods Black men make in planning their approach to social mobility. The data showed considerations of money, health, work, responsibility for family and community, relationship building, the need to operate outside of comfort zone, trade-offs made, discerning advice received, education, informal learning, as well as the timing of opportunities. With this in mind, theme five emerged from the data associated with this question and an aggregate of seven categories: emotional support, development, autonomy, race, social, faith, and resilience.

Further, in accordance with the conceptual framework, theme five supports the effect of the social environment on participants’ drive towards social mobility. Theme six emerged from the data associated with this question and an aggregate of four categories: social, family, character, and relationships. Furthermore, theme six is represented in the behavior, social environment, cognitive affect, and cognitive resource portions of the conceptual framework. Theme seven emerged from the data associated with this question and an aggregate of three categories: contentment, career, and development. Additionally, it is represented in the cognitive affect section of the conceptual framework.

**Theme 5: Connectivity to and engagement in networks of support that reflect and support the unique needs of Black men.**
The participants in this study largely attributed their ability to become socially mobile to being connected to and engaged in supportive networks. Foundational to their supportive networks was the value of family, which resonated with all of the participants as a source of emotional support and sometimes financial support. This accords with previous research in which family bonds and communities of support were found to fortify resilience and foster success for Black men (Burton, 2013; Walsh, 2012). For many, the importance of family was instilled during their formative years and equipped them with the values, attitudes, and beliefs that has guided them through adulthood. It is important to note that in the black community, the parameters of family often extend beyond the concept of nuclear families, lending itself to the African proverb that states, “It takes a village to raise a child.” To that end, and considering that many of the participants were raised in single parent households, grandparents, godparents, aunts, etc. were amongst those that participants named critical to support networks and influential to their overall development.

In addition to family as foundational was also the idea of faith. Although most spoke of Christianity, the Muslim and Rastafari faith was also mentioned. Nonetheless, faith was viewed as imperative and instrumental in fueling participants’ visions and navigating challenges. In other words, it appeared that much of the optimism that was expressed by participants was grounded in a belief of a higher power and preordination. Similarly, in the face of hardships or challenges participants spoke to a reliance on spiritual guidance. To that end, many participants have maintained a connection to the churches in which they were raised or have been intentional about finding places to worship. In accordance with the discussion of family above, faith was a cornerstone in the values and belief system that were imparted in participants.
Additional means of connectivity that were shared included belonging to African American fraternal organizations, attending historically black colleges or universities, and engagement with special interest community groups. A few participants highlighted their support of and attendance at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) which seemingly tells of a need to feel connected and immersed in a culture that was historically created to meet the specific needs of Black students. This desire became more apparent in the narratives of participants who attended predominantly white institutions in expressing their efforts to engage with affinity groups that met their unique needs. Likewise, the brotherhood offered by fraternities helps foster connectivity across various settings and participants have been able to engage with other affinity groups that facilitated community and youth engagement. Generally speaking, it was clear that participants felt a sense of responsibility not only towards their families and faith, but the larger Black community as well.

Theme 6: The intentional cultivation of positive personal and professional relationships enhances understanding of self and others within social context towards social mobility.

Participants adamantly spoke to the need to cultivate positive personal and professional relationships as a means of expanding your social network, growing your knowledge base, and having access to necessary resources. As Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) assert, having access to resources and information can be a direct relection of knowing the right people. Some of the relationships that they spoke of were with family members, but the main focus was on building relationships with non-family members. As mentioned in earlier chapters, capital built with close, personal relationships is called bonding capital, capital built on non-personal, far-reaching connections bridging capital, the latter is preferred for career gains (Kavanaugh et al., 2005). So,
although they did not refer to it as bridging capital, participants recognize the importance of it to being socially mobile.

Further, in considering the cultivation of relationship, mentors and models of behaviors have also been key to the participants’ development. Some participants recalled specific character and/or skill building lessons delivered by influential people early on that impacted the rest of their lives. For example, one participant spoke of his mechanic career beginning with his father teaching him to put brakes on a car at the age of eleven. Another was motivated by the deprecating statement of his coach telling him that basketball was his only chance for success. These are brief illustrations of the learning and resilience exhibited by participants of this study prior to adulthood. As adults, participants reported having nurtured and maintained relationships with mentors over the years and in the case of new ventures, they have aligned themselves with likeminded groups, and built intentional relationships with individuals who are modeling what they want to do.

**Theme 7: Within the context of what participants value, factors regarding money, health, and work influence their satisfaction with life.**

Although the greatest value seen from participants was the value of family, participants’ satisfaction with life was also related to money, health, and work. More specifically participants expressed concerns with having enough money to feel stable and secure, being in good health, and establishing work life balance. There was not a lot of social mobility literature regarding the concerns that participants expressed with the impact health on life satisfaction; however, the American Psychological Association (2011) addresses this as a source of significant stress for which resilience permits adaptation. There was more literature on work and money that spoke to the necessity of having strong starts or origins in life to realize social mobility (Hout, 2015;
Reeves & Grannis, 2014). One could deduce that becoming socially mobile would aid overall satisfaction with life. Nevertheless, many participants had meager beginnings, and others experienced financial hardships as an adult which likely influences the importance of money to their overall life satisfaction. Likewise, some of the participants have experienced the death of important people in their lives, or continue to deal with family member disabilities due to illnesses such as cancer, strokes, and diabetes that impacts the value placed on good health. However, achieving work life balance was a challenge that some participants reported continuing to struggle with; but, the imbalance was seen as a means to an end.

Participants were also forthcoming in sharing reasons for the value they have placed on certain aspects of their lives. One participant mentioned wanting to be home to have dinner with his family every night, this was something that his own father’s work schedule didn’t permit. Another expressed frustration with lacking control over his life, financially and otherwise, that he simply wanted to be able to take a trip somewhere if he wants to. Finally, another participant who serves as a caretaker for his disabled mother embarked upon a weight loss program to help lower his risk of illnesses that run in his family, as well as progress his acting career. All in all, within the context of what participants value for life satisfaction, focusing on creating a legacy for their families that did not previously exist, as well as, breaking cycles of lack and self-destructive behaviors proved pivotal.

Summary

This chapter presented the results of the analysis of fourteen semi-structured interviews with Black men who have experienced the phenomenon of social mobility. As previously mentioned, interviews with all but one of the participants took place by phone. An analysis of the KAI inventory results, QOLI, and interview transcripts yielded seven themes that serve to
address the research questions and problem statement presented in this study. The themes were used in part to answer the research questions that guided this chapter; however, implementations and recommendation affiliated each theme are discussed in Chapter five.

Chapter 5

Discussion, Implications, Recommendations

As previously mentioned, this study was designed to examine the factors that lend themselves to the social mobility of Black men from a cognitive perspective and simultaneously give voice to a traditionally marginalized group. Looking specifically at problem solving style preferences, decision-making processes, performed behaviors, and social factors, the researcher sought to expose commonalities as well as variations in Black men’s experiences with social mobility. Hence, this final chapter of the dissertation will begin by reiterating the problem statement, *a priori* assumptions, reviewing the study’s pertinent methodology, as well as, the conceptual framework. The chapter will conclude with an interpretation of the thematic outcomes, discussion of their implications and recommendations, and recommendations for future research study.

Problem Statement

“Stagnant wages, insufficient employment opportunity, and rising inequality” (p. 27) have arrested the idea of upward social mobility for many Americans, making it illogical to assume that the next generation will inevitably do better than the previous generation (Hout, 2015). This implies that current SESs are likely to be reproduced in future generations, which makes the outlook bleak for those that fall on the lower end of the spectrum. In considering the influence of social origins on social mobility as the literature has asserted (Hout, 2015; Reeves &
Grannis, 2014), Blacks are often handicapped due to originating from poorer occupational status origins than their White counterparts (Yamaguchi, 2009). Also, contrary to what some may think, education has not proven to be the great equalizer for the uniform experience of social mobility between Blacks and Whites. Much of the disparities that continue to exist are related to access and educational attainment as impacted by parents’ education level, family structures and the timing of marriage and procreation, or the lack thereof (Maralani, 2013). With these factors in mind and considering the aforementioned discussion of stereotyping and racism, Black men face unique challenges in navigating the social mobility landscape.

To that end, there is a gap that exists in the perceptions, generalizations, and realizations of social mobility for Black men in America. There have been a number of black men, past and present, that have beat the odds and serve as examples of extraordinary achievement. However, the flip side of the coin reveals stories about Black men that tend to fall at the polar opposite end and paints a picture of a societal threat. This dichotomous disparity is perplexing and adds to some of the greatest challenges and barriers to social mobility facing Black men. Obama (2014) identifies them as a group that has “had the odds stacked against them in unique ways that require unique solutions; groups who’ve seen fewer opportunities that have spanned generations” (para. 11). Thus, understanding the lived experiences of Black men may aid in bridging the perception gap and identifying opportunity structures by discerning meaning making, facilitating diverse perspectives, and highlighting their unique problem solving experiences with the phenomenon of social mobility.

The approaches employed by current models and theories in the exploration of the social mobility of Black men have limitations in that they are deficit-oriented and often neglect the intragroup diversities of Black men. A great deal of the literature is written within the context of
education giving way to deficit-thinking which characteristically tends to overgeneralize, embrace low expectations, assume cultural deficiencies, and silence the voices of marginalized groups (Simone, 2012; Yosso, 2005). Further, there are a number of competing theories in the exploration of social mobility for African Americans that are founded in educational psychology, culture, and motivation to name a few. Critical theory presents repeatedly, more specifically critical race theory as it acknowledges the impact of systemic injustices and attempts to give voice to the experiences of marginalized groups. However, there is not currently a comprehensive model that effectively encapsulates the breadth of factors impacting the means by which Black men perceive, behave and strategize for social mobility. Hence, taking a cognitive approach may offer unique and comprehensive insights into individual experiences, diverse social interactions, and performed behaviors that have enabled social mobility for Black men. To that end, this research employed a cognitive lens to explore the ways by which this sample of Black men perceive, describe and interpret their social mobility experiences. For this study social mobility has been operationalized as self-reported changes in income levels and SES status, or the lack thereof; therefore, experiences affecting these factors provided a basis for exploring the lived experiences of these Black men in society.

Methodology

As described in Chapter 3, the research was a phenomenological study examining the lived experiences of Black men with the phenomenon of social mobility. As a phenomenological study, the researcher used qualitative methods to gather information on participants’ experiences with social mobility. Accordingly, the study relied on interviews and document analysis as a means of describing and interpreting the shared experiences.
A total of fourteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with men between the ages of 26 to 45 who identified as African-American and consented to participant in the study. With the exception of the pilot interview, all remaining interviews were conducted by telephone. Participants were also asked to complete Kirton’s Adaption – Innovation (KAI) inventory to assess their individual problem solving style preference, as well as the Quality of Life Inventory (QOLI) to assess the satisfaction and importance of 16 areas of life. A follow-up email was sent in question and answer format to 13 participants seeking clarification on contradictions that arose between their interviews and QOLI results. Data was collected between mid-March and the end of April, 2016.

Study Summary

This study was influenced by several a priori assumptions that were grounded in the literature and aligned to the research questions. These assumptions provided the foundation for exploring the impact that problem solving styles, behavior, and the social factors had on Black men’s perceptions, analysis, decision making, and actions towards social mobility. Likewise, the semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix E) was developed in accordance with these assumptions. They were: 1) Racialized experiences have impacted the social mobility of Black men. 2) The experiences of socially mobile Black men should be represented through an anti-deficit framework. 3) The double consciousness in which Black men live and work require them to reconcile their identities to negotiate overarching stereotypes and barriers to social mobility. 4) The social mobility of Black men in community and career is influenced by cognitive factors, behavior, and the social effects of the environment. 5) Persevering through adversity and embracing opportunities for growth are cornerstones in the social mobility of Black men. As has been mentioned, these propositional statements supported the development of the study’s
research questions, and in addition to being grounded in the literature were fortified by the participants’ open and personal responses.

The purpose of this study was to employ a cognitive lens to examine factors affecting the social mobility experiences of Black men throughout their educational pursuits, career, and/or community involvement; ultimately giving voice to a traditionally marginalized group. Cognitive problem solving styles, decision making, performed behaviors, and diverse social interactions were explored within the context of negotiating overarching stereotypes, overcoming barriers, making good decision, and persisting towards social mobility. The guiding research questions for this study were: 1.) How do Black men who are more adaptive or more innovative perceive and describe their experience with social mobility? 2.) How do Black men analyze and resolve key life-changing moments that have the potential to impact their pursuit of social mobility? 3.) What behaviors do Black men agree to perform and accept as imperative to gaining awareness and access to social mobility? 4.) What considerations of people, context, content, and methods do Black men make in planning their approach to social mobility?

Interview data from the purposeful sample of Black men was used to emphasize facets of their experience within specific contexts, address value considerations in their approach to social mobility, assess the implications of problem solving style references, and offer insight regarding unique needs and intentional behaviors. As previously discussed in Chapter 4, seven main themes emerged from the data analysis as having been experienced by the participants. The themes that emerged, as listed below, guide the implementation and recommendation discussions in this chapter, and reveal that collectively the Black men studied:
1. Expressed slight differences in approaches to problem solving and change management respective to their more adaptive or more innovative preferred style, with greater delineation apparent, based on individual sub scores.

2. Practiced self-reflection and learned to modified their behaviors, communication approaches, and expectations as needed.

3. Regarded strong work ethic and successful outcomes as a means to mitigate potential racial inequities.

4. Contended with authenticity concerns in identity development and social interactions, levied both internally and externally.

5. Valued being connected to and engaged in networks of support that reflect and support their unique needs.

6. Intentionally cultivated positive personal and professional relationships to enhance understanding of self and others.

7. Based their satisfaction with life in part on factors related to money, health, and work. Participants were forthcoming about their experiences and expressed hopefulness about their social mobility in general. Much of what was shared was within the vein of self-reflection, learning, accountability, family, and diverse measures of success. Additionally, although race was understood to be a factor, participants shared strategies they believe have helped them to transcend race.

The conceptual framework for this study took into account cognitive function, race, and resilience. Cognitive function was explored via a triad of preferred style for problem solving (cognitive effect), the accumulation of knowledge and experience (cognitive resource), and attitudes, values, and belief (cognitive affect). The idea being that Black men’s experiences with
social mobility can be better understood by exploring how they prefer to approach problem solving, the means by which they go about acquiring and comprehending information, as well as, understanding the basis of their value and belief system that drives them to do any of the aforementioned. Nonetheless, an understanding of cognitive functioning only provides insight into each person individually and seeing as though learning does not happen in a bubble, the framework also includes an examination of the performed behaviors and the dynamics of their social environments. To that end, a discussion of social mobility and social environments would be deficient without considering the role race plays in the social interactions for this demographic group. Further, adversity is inherent to a discussion of race in America, thus the conceptual framework incorporates the influence of resilience.

Cognitive function provided the backdrop for the study complemented by CRT and resilience, thus the themes are situated throughout the schema. Theme one fits within cognitive effect as this is influenced by cognitive process, which includes preferred style and potential level. In addition to their actual scores, participants’ narratives had indicators of being more adaptive or more innovative, and demographic information collected spoke to participants’ potential level. Theme two and three focus on performed behaviors that participants exhibited as they negotiated their social mobility experiences. Obviously they can be situated in the behavior section of the conceptual framework; still these themes take into account elements of CRT in that certain behaviors and changes were dictated by experiential knowledge garnered personally or observed in others that mandated what was deemed appropriate. It further contends with dominant ideology in that participants sought to not be representative of overarching stereotypes that have been heavily documented (Nedhari, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002); this and the former speak to the centrality of race and racism as they intersect with being a Black man in
America. With this in mind, from a cognitive function perspective the knowledge and learning that informs the behaviors can be situated in cognitive resource where the influential process is learning and memory. In addition to being situated in behavior, and interwoven with CRT, themes two and three are also part of cognitive affect in that participants’ self-awareness and value system triggered the process of motive to influence their behavioral changes. Concerns with being their authentic selves was the underpinning for theme four and is very much steeped in the CRT, resilience, cognitive effect, cognitive affect, behavior, and social environment section of the framework. Making space for understanding the lived experiences of the participants and the impact those experiences have had on their social mobility is supported by the tenets of CRT as have been discussed in previous studies (Pelzer, 2016; Yosso, 2005).

Likewise, participants expressed being perceived by friends and family members as having an elitist attitude to which they have had to exhibit resilience in the face of being mocked. Inasmuch as personality is hardwired, participants’ authentic selves are apparent in cognitive effect, but an understanding of what they value provides insight into their motivation to behave in ways that may contradict their authentic selves given changes in the social environment. Theme five, in valuing connection and engagement with support networks, fits within the social environment for which the influential process is group dynamics and takes into consideration things such as culture and opportunity. Additionally, it is the support network from which individuals draw the encouragement and strength to build their resiliency which accords with discussion on resilience presented by Simmons (2014). Further, in vying for building strong relationships, theme six can be situated in the framework within behavior, social environment, cognitive affect, and cognitive resource. Some participants expressed having to embody personality traits and behave in ways that differed from their norm to facilitate relationships in
diverse social environments. However, because they understood the value of making those connections they were motivated to do so and deliberate in attaining skills or knowledge to advance them in certain circles. Finally, theme seven aligns with cognitive affect in that it speaks to those things that arose as valuable and pertinent to participants’ satisfaction with life. Accordingly, participants were motivated by the need to attain and sustain those things which in this case were money, health, and work.

Discussion

Throughout the course of this study, from inception through data analysis, an insufferable number of Black men within the demographic parameters of this study have senselessly lost their lives. Many of these losses have come at the hands of law enforcement officers under questionable circumstances, with contradictory accounts, and in some cases graphic videos, yet void of satisfactory judicial responses. These and other such matters have prompted the Black Lives Matters movement as mentioned previously with a call to restore “basic human rights and dignity” (Cullors et al., 2016; Howard, 2016, p. 102). Likewise, these unfortunate incidents are being witnessed on a national stage and have called into question the value that society attributes to Black men in America. Their perceived and/or realized value has strong implication for the social mobility of Black men, which has subsequently provided the impetus for this study. However, this study does not postulate that social mobility challenges are exclusive to Black men; but, Black men face unique and sometimes life-threatening challenges in society that can negate their agency and neutralize their social mobility efforts.

Participants in this study have had their own unique experiences with social mobility that were apparent in their narratives. Accordingly, each has defined success in their own terms and
subsequently, have been socially mobile and attained varying levels of success. For Darryl, success had a faith based and social connotation,

As I spoke on before my faith, my faith speaks of gaining a wife and having your quiverfull which means having children and you know just enjoying people around you. That is successful to me, being able to have people around you that you can really enjoy that love you and you love them they respect you and you respect them…

Since being interviewed, he has married and gained two stepsons. Tyrone borrowed his definition of success from a famous actor sharing, “I'm going to adopt Hill Harper's definition of successful, being unreasonably happy and just being happy doing what it is that you do and loving what you do …” Accordingly, he conveyed a strong sense of gratification with the fact that he is currently following his dream of being an actor which also aligned with his high classification on the life satisfaction inventory. Nathan conveyed an appreciation of the journey towards success in stating, “when you see progress I mean what more can you ask for, you know Rome was not built in a day as they say.” Yogi expressed a more mainstream standard of success in defining it along the lines of, “successful marriages … good careers … stable environment … avoided all the negatives … no one went to jail, never got hooked on drugs, [or] involved in shady behavior."

Regardless of the measure, majority of the participants have navigated their social mobility experiences with some degree of success. At varying levels, they have transcended many of the pitfalls that have befallen their Black male counterparts. Hence, this discussion serves to further the counter-narratives regarding the value of Black men in America and promote a change in the perception of the value they contribute to society.
Theme 1: **Slight differences in approaches to problem solving and change management respective to their more adaptive or more innovative preferred style were present, with greater delineation apparent, based on individual sub scores.**

More adaptive and more innovative preferences for problem solving are found in the cognitive effect section of the conceptual framework. According to theme seven, participants behaviors aligned with their respective placement on the KAI continuum as would be expected and differences between the two were apparent, yet not drastic. Also, in looking at their sub scores greater differences were seen in how they identified with the phenomenon of social mobility and decided to engage with it. Nonetheless, it is the opinion of the researcher that a large participant sample would be needed to truly tease out the nuances introduced by variations in sub scores. Seeing as though the inventory makes no value judgment, and just shows how individuals solve problems (Friedel, 2014), theme seven can be interpreted along the lines of the theory. As has been mentioned, more adaptive problem solvers seek to make things better within a given structure, while more innovative problem solvers seek to make things different in spite of structure (Kirton, 2011). Generally speaking, the more adaptive pursued social mobility in accordance with tradition societal structures and the more innovative found it in spite of, or in addition to traditional societal structures; nonetheless, they all were progressively socially mobile in their own right.

**Implications for practice.** KAI promotes an understanding of diversity in cognitive problem solving preferences to facilitate change and better team interactions. Diversity goes beyond race and therefore, challenges with communication, problem solving, etc. should not be relegated to just matters of race and culture. Opening up to this notion makes for more fruitful social interactions. Hence, this study can promote a reclassification of the diversity challenges in
the workplace to include cognitive differences. Subsequently, it also introduces a framework for creating more productive teams and work environments.

**Recommendation.** KAI and adaption-innovation theory must become a part of the diversity discussion in the workplace, community, and beyond. It sheds light on differences that may have previously been biasedly relegated to issues of race, class, gender, etc. Furthermore, it can make problem solving, decision making, and change management more objective, productive, and progressive.

**Theme 2: Self-reflection and modifications to behavior, communication approaches, and expectations become routine in the pursuit of social mobility for Black men.**

Per the conceptual framework for this study, cognitive affect, cognitive resource, and cognitive effect work together in various ways to influence behavior. Likewise, the influence of the environment is interwoven in that as well. So, in terms of this study, attitudes and value systems, as have been influenced by the social environment, can motivate Black men to pursue social mobility using their preferred style or by operating outside of their preferred style resulting in coping behavior. The things they have learned, skills honed, and experiences had can also add to their motivation and resulting behavior in the problem solving process. To that end, theme two can be interpreted to mean that interaction in and feedback from the social environment has had an impact on the attitudes of the Black men in this study, causing them to learn and store information regarding what works and what does not work in aiding their social mobility. As impression management literature explains, intentionality in the manipulation of nonverbal cues and adaptation to the communication norms of others often become imperative to successfully operating within different cultures and environments (Spong & Kamau, 2012). Subsequently, in seeking to manage the impressions others have of them, participants have chosen to adapt their
behavior, communication, and expectations accordingly, which may or may not be in alignment with their preferred styles.

**Implications for practice.** This study can inform educational, professional, and community programming for Black men by highlighting the need for formal and informal learning in the area of effective communication strategies, professional imaging, personal goal setting, etc. Agency and accountability are key and should be balanced with opportunities for learning as well as coaching and mentoring. Focusing on relationship building and people management can foster more proximity contact and more positive social interactions. As a participant highlighted, programming should include different aspects of relationship building and people management similar to Dale Carnegie training on How to Win Friends and Influence People.

**Recommendations.** Honest, unbiased assessments must be made and opportunities for continued development should be offered. Given the unique challenges faced by this demographic group, affinity groups may provide the best forum for self-reflective practices and mentoring for necessary evolution sans unconscious bias. Additionally, observation and modeling can prove helpful, thus a Show, Tell, Do, Review approach can be utilized to guide reflection and modifications.

**Theme 3: Strong work ethic and successful outcomes are perceived mitigators of racial inequities.**

In conceptual framework for this study, cognitive affect has a reciprocal relationship with product. This illustrates a drive towards the manifestation of an idea or product, that is grounded in a need, value, attitude, or belief. Theme three represents that drive as being grounded in the participants valuing having a strong work ethic towards the creation of great outcomes or
products. Moreover, this value placement is perceived to supersede race and racism issues which are conditions they acknowledge exist in their social environments. This theme speaks to the dual consciousness referenced in the literature in which individuals believe in their personal agency in the face of structural inequality (Welburn, 2016). Theme three can also be interpreted along the lines of Kirton’s (2011) assertion that problem solving is the key to life and the only means of survival for the human species. To that end, attributing the successes or failures in the pursuit of social mobility to hard work and successful outcomes can aid the Black man’s survival within a racialized society by providing a defense mechanism that salvages his sense of self and agency.

**Implications for practice.** Harper (2012) posited that for Black male college students, instructors often enter the classroom with unconscious biases towards Black men that manifest in their teaching practices and ultimately isolate the student. This is occurring in professional settings as well; therefore, this study can inform methods for evaluating those who manage Black men to uncover and address unconscious biases, coach communication strategies, and inform cultural sensitivity trainings. Nonetheless, measures of success need to be clear, consistent, and equitably applied. This requires transparency and open availability of such information which can further help to alleviate unconscious bias and/or in effecting coaching/leadership.

**Recommendations.** Set Black men up for success and publicly recognize those who have been successful; this can work wonders for changing the climate in educational institutions and professional organizations. To that end, the objective evaluation of outcomes, and equity in such objectivity across majority and minority groups can foster a climate fortified against racial bias. Additional, it is imperative to make sure that evaluation procedures and tools aren’t culturally biased and primed for sweeping generalizations (i.e. poor communication skills).
Theme 4: **Concerns with authenticity, levied both internally and externally, impact identity development and social interactions.**

The environment, cognitive affect, cognitive resource, and ultimately behavior sections of the conceptual framework for this study can all be overlaid with authenticity. Impression management research revealed apprehensions from underrepresented population group members about engaging in authentic social exchanges with majority group members (Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010; Brondolo et al., 2012). Considering this, social interactions can be inauthentic; similarly, the value and belief systems that are adhered to socially may not align with someone’s authentic personal values or need. Not only that, but perceptions levied on the authenticity of interactions, behaviors, or values influence how information is learned and experiences are remembered, all of which ultimately impact exhibited behaviors. Hence, theme six can be interpreted to mean that the desire to be authentic and true to self in social environments results in conflict within the participants and tension in their interpersonal relationships, issues that can negatively impact social mobility if not managed correctly.

**Implications for practice.** Based on the experiences of participants, this study can help educational and professional organizations better understand the plight of Black men. This understanding can serve to facilitate more authentic social interactions. It begins by recognizing the diversity that exist amongst Black men and valuing their individual contributions. They should be empowered to be themselves by acknowledging biases and preconceived notions, and working to create welcoming environments. Furthermore, the narratives shared in this study can work to change the perception of Black men in America and the value they add.

**Recommendation.** Counter-stories must continue to be voiced and widely shared until they command the same truism as current master-narratives. Thus, outlets must be created in
various mediums to allow for this exchange and studies such as this serves as one. Further, advancing the participants’ idea of evolution over assimilation or more pejorative terms can lead to a redefining and acceptance of evolved versions of authentic selves, internally and externally.

Theme 5: **Connectivity to and engagement in networks of support that reflect and support the unique needs of Black men.**

The conceptual framework for this study showcases the interrelatedness between the social effects of environment, which includes scope, climate, culture, and opportunity; and cognitive affect which includes values, beliefs, attitudes, and need. In other words, the interactions, evaluations, and feedback that occur within the social environment are impacted by, and has an impact on the things that motivate one to persist in problem solving, which in this study means pursuing social mobility. Hence, theme one can be interpreted to mean social environments that support, in theory and practice, those things that have been identified as important to the Black men in this study (i.e. the influence of faith and family, their value and belief system, etc.) serve to motivate them to overcome challenges and persist in their pursuit of social mobility.

**Implications for practice.** According to the research, the importance of family, faith, and supports of the kind are germane to African Americans ability to overcome adversity and exercise resilience (Coppock, 2013; Simmons, 2014). To that end, educational, professional, and community programming for Black men has a better chance of being perceived as useful and effective if it mimics the networks describe above at appropriate crossroads. Black men need to see reflections of themselves and the things they value in the educational, occupational, and communal places they aspire to be a part of, literally and figuratively. This serves to affirm their social identity, confidence, and motivation. Additionally, because the concept of family takes on
extended meaning in the black community, blood relations are not necessary to replicate a familial support structure.

**Recommendations.** Establish support systems that combat feelings of isolation, promote avenues for non-threatening open communication, and foster a nexus for integrating allegiance groups at appropriate crossroads. Also, apply the Black community’s extended concept of family within the social environments that engage Black men. This can be done via mentoring relationship, organized events that promote the inclusion of family and friends, and/or invitations to engage in dialogue with higher-ups in non-formal ways, to name a few methods. Furthermore, policies need to support collaboration between educational, occupational, and community groups that serve Black men. This can be done via programming that spans across the workplace and community that provides a scaffolding of individuals to deliver support at varying levels, in various settings, and by varied expertise. Additionally, ensuring literal and figurative representation, encouraging social inclusion and opportunities for proximity content will aid intentionality in policy and practice to ensure and sustain supports in terms of personal and professional development, and personnel representation.

**Theme 6:** The intentional cultivation of positive personal and professional relationships enhances understanding of self and others within social context towards social mobility.

The conceptual framework for this study clearly illustrated the influence that the environment has on cognitive function, this with the addition of behavior promotes a triadic, reciprocal relationship. In other words, everything that occurs in the environment impacts and is impacted by cognitive function and behavior. Hence, theme four can be interpreted to mean social mobility for the participants was only possible due to the cultivation of good relationships, and considering the role of the environment, this works best when there is receptiveness and
reciprocity from all stakeholders. According to the literature on social networks and social
capital, social relationships represent access to coveted resources, privileged information, and influential people and are enhanced by the social relationships that both bonding and bridging social capital yield. Bonding capital represents interpersonally integrated networks while bridging is less interpersonally integrated and more transactional in nature, but add greater value in building capital that serves to widen social networks and enhance the reciprocity of resources (Kavanaugh et al., 2005). With this in mind, the Black men in this study understand and practice growing valuable networks.

**Implications for practice.** Black men aspiring to be socially mobile must be willing to step out of their comfort zones and build bridging capital. Literature tells us that social networks for African Americans tend to be underresourced and heavier on bonding capital (Lin, 2000; Parks-Yancy et al., 2009), hence moving beyond comfort zones to cultivate relationships is imperative. This requires intentionally seeking out new positive social environments and individuals who hail from different backgrounds. Thus, this study can inform networking workshops designed for Black men to learn methods of networking. However, diverse settings and communication channels need foster counter narratives about Black men to ensure environments are receptive and conducive to purposeful networking.

**Recommendations.** Networking to build bridging capital will yield the greatest payoff for social mobility. Hence, networking workshops can be developed to facilitate this practice, in addition to promoting events where there are opportunities for both low stakes and high stakes networking opportunities. Practice makes perfect, so networking tactics must be practiced and once connections are made, it is advisable to implement a method for staying in contact that is most feasible to the nature of the relationship (i.e. social media, email, phone).
Theme 7: **Within the context of what participants value, factors regarding money, health, and work influence their satisfaction with life.**

Cognitive affect is a part of the conceptual framework for this study and according to Kirton (2013) its function is to fuel perseverance and concentration toward the solving of a problem in accordance with one’s value and belief system, need, and attitudes. Put another way, based on what someone prioritizes they will dedicate as much energy, time, and dedication as they deem necessary in pursuit of a solution to an identified problem. Considering this, theme five can be interpreted to mean that participants perceptions of social mobility, and within that life satisfaction, reside within the interconnectivity between money, health, or work in their lives. In order to be socially mobile and sustain a certain standard of living they have to earn money by working. Depending on whether their workplace dealings align with their preferred style, it may or may not be a source of stress, or at the least challenge their work life balance. Stress or the inability to achieve balance can encourage health issues, some of which are more prevalent in the Black community. Flynn (2012) identifies jobs, health, and wealth accumulation amongst the disparities that Blacks in America have had to contend. President Obama (2015) also asserted fair wages, affordable healthcare, unemployment/underemployment as some of the greatest challenges in the 21st century. Given these factors, Black men in this study are justified in attributing a portion of their satisfaction with life and overall social mobility on ensuring good health, employment, and income.

**Implications for practice.** In light of what participants shared as important to life satisfaction, this study can serve as a reference point to businesses and community groups that employ, serve, or engage with Black men. Accordingly, offerings such as money management workshops, health screenings, employment services, and professional development can be
informed by the narratives of this study. Also, in the creation of a healthy lifestyle and work life balance, it is important to note that for many in this study, this included having a family, being actively engaged, and creating/leaving a legacy. Nevertheless, not all Black men are the same, nor do they all want the same things; therefore, recognizing their in-group diversities and address their unique needs and concerns is essential.

**Recommendations.** Taking the time to understand what individuals within this demographic group value can serve to inform decisions about career and community offerings. The key is in understanding that one does not represent, or speak for all and thus each much be treated as individual and unique needs addressed. Accordingly, this can be done simply by asking them (i.e. surveys, focus groups, one-on-ones, etc.), listening to them, and designing custom solutions to address the needs as they have explained them.

Summary

This chapter restated the problem and *a priori* assumptions, reviewed the study’s pertinent methodology, as well as, the conceptual framework. The chapter concludes with an interpretation of the thematic outcomes, implications and recommendations for each theme, as well as, recommendations for future research.

Study Conclusions

This study employed a cognitive lens in examining the social mobility experiences of Black men throughout their educational and occupational pursuits, and community involvement. In accordance with conceptual framework for the study, that lens included the interrelated processes of cognitive effect (preferred problem solving style), cognitive resource (knowledge, experience), cognitive affect (values, beliefs), as impacted by environment, and influencing behavior. To that end, the researcher presented counter-narratives about Black men to rebuff
master narratives that convey them negatively, as leeches and menaces to society; conversely giving them voice and planting a seed promoting their value to society. Through her study, she facilitated an understanding of their values and motivating factors which include, but are not limited to, valuing family, practicing self-reflection, learning to be adaptable, working hard, cultivating positive interpersonal relationships, and being true to self. These were amongst the themes that arose from the narratives.

Although participants did not place a heavy emphasis on the impact of race on their social mobility, they concede the existence of structural inequalities in accordance with the CRT portion of the framework which seeks to acknowledges the role race and racism has had in shaping the social mobility experiences of Blacks in America. CRT further seeks to give voice to marginalized groups which was the underpinning of this study. In the same way, this study introduced characteristics and behaviors that have been influential in the social mobility of Black men and thus, can serve as a strategic aid in the aspiring Black man’s toolkit. Resilient characteristics and behaviors were apparent in the narratives participants shared giving credence to its inclusion in the conceptual framework. The American Psychological Association contextualizes resilience in terms of sources of stress like family, interpersonal relationships, health problems, workplace issues, and financial concerns. Consequently, these stressors arose in the thematic outcomes and in conjunction with the voice promoted by CRT, and an understanding of cognitive function, all work together to tell the story of this group of Black men.

Altogether, this study added to the body of literature on Black men and social mobility by filling a gap in the exploration of their social mobility from a cognitive perspective. It also represented information potentially pertinent to environmental scanning strategies for
educational, professional, and community organization that engage with Black men. This can aid in identifying and eliminating unconscious biases and blocked opportunity structures. Finally, this study presented information to inform policy and programming that affects Black men towards acknowledging structural inequalities and allocating resources to activities and partnerships that support their unique needs.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study has implications for educational, professional, and community organizations that aspire to better serve Black men, mitigate unconscious biases, consciously work to change value perceptions, and/or retain their engagement. Men between the ages of 21 and 59 who identified as African American and were willing to share their social mobility experiences were targeted for participation. Nonetheless, as mentioned previously social mobility challenges are not exclusive to Black men and can be particularly prominent for minorities in general; therefore, the study can be repeated with men who identify as being from African descent, not necessarily African American. Men who identify as Hispanic or Native American may also provide valuable insight about social mobility for minorities. Also, repeating the study with a larger sample size may help to tease out more of the nuances that may exist in the pursuits of social mobility for Black men given their preferred problem solving style. Additionally, seeing as though this study did not narrowly target participants, narrowing the population by variables such as: first generation college goers, blue collar workers, or industry may serve to further add to the cognitive body of knowledge on the social mobility of Black men. Finally, studies that delve deeper into the concept of dual consciousness are warranted in seeking to understand the reluctance of socially mobile Black men to present race and racism at the forefront of their discussion on challenges impacting their journey.
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Appendices
Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

MEMORANDUM

DATE: May 9, 2016

TO: Curtis Robert Friedel, Megan Marie Seibel, Tinesha Marie Woods-Wells, James C Anderson II, Anna Katherine Ward

FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires January 29, 2021)

PROTOCOL TITLE: Applying a Cognitive Lens to the Exploration of Social Mobility of African American Men: A Phenomenological Study

IRB NUMBER: 16-213

Effective May 9, 2016, the Virginia Tech Institution Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the Amendment request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As: Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 6,7
Protocol Approval Date: March 8, 2016
Protocol Expiration Date: March 7, 2017
Continuing Review Due Date*: February 21, 2017

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.
## Appendix B: a priori Assumptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumption</th>
<th>Supporting Literature</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Racialized experiences have impacted the social mobility of Black men.</strong></td>
<td>“12 Angry Men: True Stories of Being a Black Man in America Today” (Parks &amp; Hughey, 2010), would suggest that every African American man in this country is at-risk—in at-risk of being racially profiled, at-risk of being mistaken for another African American male who “looks” like you, at-risk of being niggered” (as cited by Simmons, 2014).</td>
<td>#2. How do black men analyze and resolve key life-changing moments that have the potential to impact their pursuit of social mobility?</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Racial microaggressions and microinequities undermine achievement, introduce self-doubt, and encourage isolation while simultaneously discrediting higher education’s anti-affirmative action ideology, meritocracy, objectivity, race neutrality, and equal opportunity (Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso, 2005).</td>
<td>#4. What considerations of people, context, content, and methods do Black men make in planning their approach to social mobility?</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Race remains a significant factor contributing to inequalities in America (Ladson-Billings &amp; Tate IV, 1995)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The experiences of socially mobile Black men should be represented through an anti-deficit framework.</strong></td>
<td>Promoting anti-deficit thinking (Harper, 2012) and multiple, varied perspectives is imperative.</td>
<td>#2. How do black men analyze and resolve key life-changing moments that have the potential to impact their pursuit of social mobility?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The deficit approach is an example of institutional racism in that it consistently reinforces social inequalities (Brondolo et al., 2012)</td>
<td>#3. What behaviors do Black men agree to perform and accept as imperative to gaining awareness and access to social mobility?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CRT represents a framework that gives “voice” to people of color which can serve to empower those who have historically been marginalized and silenced (Yosso, 2005)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The double consciousness in which Black men live and work require them to reconcile their identities to negotiate overarching</strong></td>
<td>Deciding to be silent versus confrontational, feeling foreign in the hood and amongst the elite, and employing observation as a survival skill are common place for African</td>
<td>#2. How do black men analyze and resolve key life-changing moments that have the potential to impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stereotypes and Barriers to Social Mobility.</strong></td>
<td>Americans trying to navigate two worlds (Simmons, 2014)</td>
<td>their pursuit of social mobility?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>W.E.B. Du Bois named a “double consciousness” experienced by African Americans in stating that they, “ever feels his two-ness – an American, A Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (Bruce, 1992; Ladson-Billings &amp; Tate IV, 1995)</td>
<td>#3. What behaviors do black men agree to perform and accept as imperative to gaining awareness and access to social mobility?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“African Americans with disabilities face what Du Bois would characterize as a “double-consciousness” … often encounter the challenge of having to internally affirm the integrity of their disability and cultural identities while confronting the norms of an educational system that has been historically hostile to those identities” (Banks &amp; Hughes, 2013, p. 368)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **The Social Mobility of Black Men in Community and Career Is Influenced by Cognitive Factors, Behavior, and the Social Effects of the Environment.** | Within the context of problem solving, adaptors and innovators exhibit diversity in the way they generate ideas, work with structure, and operate with rules (Kirton, 2011). | #1. How do black men who are more adaptive or more innovative perceive and describe their experience with social mobility? |

| Persevering through Adversity and Embracing Opportunities for Growth Are Cornerstones in the Social Mobility of Black Men. | Resiliency (resilience theory) provides a lens for understanding how “at-risk” profiling can be superseded and success realized for African Americans (Simmons, 2014). Resilience has been conceptualized as a driving force that motivates growth and development through adversity, improves self-efficacy, and restores hope (Richardson, 2002). | #2. How do black men analyze and resolve key life-changing moments that have the potential to impact their pursuit of social mobility? #3. What behaviors do black men agree to perform and accept as imperative to gaining awareness and access to social mobility? #4. What considerations of |
people, context, content, and methods do Black men make in planning their approach to social mobility?
Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Title of Study
Applying a Cognitive Lens to the Exploration of Social Mobility of African American Men: A Phenomenological Study

Principal Researcher
Tinesha Woods-Wells (tinesha@vt.edu)/(708) 703-2866

Principal Advisors
Dr. Curt Friedel (cfriedel@vt.edu)/(540) 231-8177
Dr. Megan Seibel (mseibel@vt.edu)/(540) 231-2375

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research project. Your participation in this project is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research projects are to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. In this consent form, you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form, it is your right to ask the investigators for clarification or more information. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the investigator named above.

What is the purpose of this research?
The goal of this study is to identify emergent themes in the social mobility of African American men through the exploration of their lived experiences and outcomes in education, career, and community. The results of this research will be used to enhance the existing body of knowledge, presented at future conference proceedings, and published in journals or magazines for educational purposes.

What will happen if you take part in this study?
Participants in this study will be asked to participate in two interviews, the first will last no more than 60 minutes and the second no more than 30 minutes. The interviews will be audio recorded. There will be approximately two weeks between the first and second interviews. During that time frame you will be asked to represent any pertinent problem solving and decision making experiences that you recall or encounter via two prompted journal entries. Prompts will cover negotiating overarching stereotypes, overcoming barriers, making good decision, and persisting towards upward social mobility.

Risks
There are no known risks to participating in this study. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose to leave the study and terminate your participation at any time.

Benefits
The research data and findings will be used to improve and increase the knowledge base of social mobility and African American men. No promise or guarantee of benefits has been made to encourage you to participate.

Confidentiality
The information from the interviews will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely and measures will be taken to protect the security of data. No personal references will be made in oral or written reports, which could link you to the project. A pseudonym will be assigned in place of your name and that pseudonym will be used on any research materials so no one can match your identity to the answers that you provide. The Virginia Tech (VT) Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view the study’s data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

Compensation
You will not be compensated for your participation in this study.

Consent to participate
I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this research study. I have had all of my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

Participant’s signature ___________________________ Date: __________________

Investigator’s signature ___________________________ Date: __________________

What if you no longer wish to participate?
It is important for you to know that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You are free to not answer any questions that you choose or respond to what is being asked of you without penalty.

Please note that there may be circumstances under which the investigator may determine that a participant should not continue as a participant.

Should you withdraw or otherwise discontinue participation, you will be compensated for the portion of the project completed in accordance with the Compensation section of this document.

What if you have questions about this study?
Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact one of the research investigators whose contact information is included at the beginning of this document.

Should you have any questions or concerns about the study’s conduct or your rights as a research subject, or need to report a research-related injury or event, you may contact the VT IRB Chair, David M. Moore at moored@vt.edu or (540) 231-4991.
Appendix D: Participant Recruitment Invite

*Are you an African American man between the ages of 21-59 with at least 5 years work experience?*

If so, I am interested in hearing from you! My name is Tinesha and I am a doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech. I am working to complete my dissertation research and I am looking for study participants who are willing to share experiences they’ve had throughout their lifetime with problem solving, decision making, dealing with stereotypes, overcoming barriers, and socioeconomic status.

Your participation would require a minimum time commitment of 10 minutes, and a maximum of 2 hours over a 3 week time period. The phases of data collection will be as follows:

1. **Online demographic survey** *(10 minutes)***
2. **Online Quality of Life inventory** *(5 minutes)*
3. **Online preferred problem solving style inventory** *(10 minutes)*
4. **Two audio recorded interviews in-person or by phone, two weeks apart (45 & 30 minutes respectively)***
5. **Two prompted journal entries via email about real-time experiences with problem solving, decision making, dealing with stereotypes, overcoming barriers, and persisting towards your current lifestyle. (5 minutes per entry)***

*** Completion of the demographic survey (#1) will make you eligible for the remaining optional phases (#2-5) of the study as listed above. The demographic survey data will be used to affirm the study parameters and ensure educational, socioeconomic, age, and lifestyle diversity amongst the participants of the study. Therefore, you may or may not be contacted to continue participating in the study beyond the completion of the demographic survey. If you are not selected to continue beyond the first phase, your information will be deleted from my files. Nevertheless, your participation at all phases is voluntary and will be kept strictly confidential.

**Interested?**

Please complete the demographic survey at the following link: *(insert Qualtrics link to Demographic Questionnaire)*

**What if you have questions about this study?**

Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact the primary researcher Tinesha Woods-Wells at tinesha@vt.edu / (708) 703-2866, or the research advisors Dr. Curt Friedel at cfriedel@vt.edu, or Dr. Megan Siebel at mseibel@vt.edu.

Should you have any questions or concerns about the study’s conduct or your rights as a research subject, or need to report a research-related injury or event, you may contact the VT IRB Chair, David M. Moore at moored@vt.edu or (540) 231-4991.
Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Introductory question to provide set for the participant:
1. Tell me the story of you… what makes you who you are today?

RQ 1: How do Black men who are more adaptive or more innovative perceive and describe their experience with social mobility?
2. How did you get to where you are now?
3. What factors (favorable or unfavorable) have been most influential in getting you here?
4. What process, if any, did you follow in establishing goals for yourself? What were the outcomes of those goals?

RQ 2: How do Black men analyze and resolve key life-changing moments that have the potential to impact their pursuit of social mobility?
5. Think back to some pivotal moments in your life; share with me what you were experiences, feeling, and thinking and how you got through it.
6. As you reflect over these moments and the overall path that has brought you to where you are in life at this point, whether things occurred intentionally or by chance, what has worked really well for you when dealing with risks and to the contrary what would you redo if you could?

RQ 3: What behaviors do Black men agree to perform and accept as imperative to gaining awareness and access to social mobility?
7. How did your specific behaviors contribute to your educational, career and/or community outcomes?
8. How do you think your family and friends perceived you as you carried out these behaviors? What feedback did you receive and from whom?

RQ 4: What considerations of people, context, content, and methods do Black men make in planning their approach to social mobility?
9. In terms of relationships and resources, what things proved valuable for the sake of reaching the goals you established for yourself? Were there changes in your values over time? Tell me more about that. What advice would you give to other black males in pursuit of social mobility?
10. In terms of lifestyle and family, are you on track with your expectations? Are you where you want to be? (probe about why they think they are or aren’t)
Appendix F: KAI Recruitment Invite

Subject: Completing the KAI
Date: Thursday, March 24, 2016 at 11:35:04 AM Central Daylight Time
From: Friedel, Curtis
To: Woods-Wells, Tinesha

From: Friedel, Curtis
Sent: Tuesday, March 08, 2016 9:23 AM
To: Woods-Wells, Tinesha
Subject: Completing the KAI

Hi ______________,

As Tinesha Woods-Wells has indicated, as part of her dissertation research, you will complete the KAI Online Response Sheet. Below is the link to do so. The KAI indicates your preferred style to solving problems. Please note, this is not a test; NOT of how well you do, but what you PREFER to do.

As a measure of preferred style, this measure has NO right or wrong answers. The measure will give an indication of your preferred way of approaching the various situations that you may face day-to-day.

The KAI will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

To access the website, go to: [http://www.kaicentre.com/kaionline.htm](http://www.kaicentre.com/kaionline.htm)

Use the unique access code: mbw2509
Use the practitioner reference: cwt2

Finally, I have learned from giving the paper-based version of the KAI, that some people have questions on specific items. Below are my typical responses for these questions:

1. **Do we need to complete the Respondent Details at the beginning of the inventory?**
   Yes, we need this information for our own recording purposes. Note that all responses on the KAI are considered confidential information and responses will not be shared.

2. **Should I mark these items based on work-related interactions or family-related interactions?**
   You should consider all of your interactions over a long period of time, when working with different colleagues and family members.

3. **Question #6 – What does “prudent” mean?**
   Prudent means to be cautious or careful.

4. **Question #15 – What is a “plodder”?**
   A plodder is someone who prefers to complete his or her tasks in a slow, steady, and methodical way.

5. **Question #23 – What does “proliferates” mean?**
Proliferates means to have many ideas at a rapid rate.

Please let me know if you have additional questions. Results will be shared with you at a workshop in the near future. For ethical reason, I will only share results with yourself and Pent Penton, unless I have your written permission.

Sincerely,
-Curt

Curtis R. Friedel, Ph.D.
Cooperative Problem Solving
Department of Agricultural, Leadership, & Community Education
214 Litton-Reaves Hall (0343)
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, VA 24061

Ph: (540) 231-8177
Fx: (540) 231-3824
Appendix G: QOLI Recruitment Invite

Subject: Invitation to Complete Inventory
Date: Thursday, March 24, 2016 at 9:59:44 PM Central Daylight Time
From: donotreply@pearson.com
To: Woods-Wells, Tinesha

Dear ,

Thank you for completing my dissertation demographic survey and agreeing to be contacted as a potential study participant. Based on your responses to the initial questionnaire, you are invited to take the Quality of Life Inventory (link below) as well as Kirton’s Adaption-Innovation Inventory (separate email to come from my advisor Dr. Curt Friedel). Each inventory should take between 5-7 minutes to complete, collectively requiring no more than 15 minutes of your time. Upon completion of these inventories, you will be contacted regarding the status and/or next steps of your participation in this study.

To complete the Quality of Life Inventory, please click the following link:

[Click here](#)

Follow the directions on the screen. Please complete no later than Wednesday, March 30th.

Risks and Benefits

There are no known risks to participating in this study. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose to leave the study and terminate your participation at any time. Please note that although your participation is immensely appreciated in furthering the body of knowledge in this area, you will not be compensated for your participation in this study.

Confidentiality

Your name will be kept confidential with the use of a pseudonym. Accordingly, any research data shared publicly and/or published will be done using a pseudonym. It is possible that the Institutional
Review Board (IRB) at Virginia Tech will view this study’s collected data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for overseeing the protection of human subjects who are involved in research.

**What if you have questions about this study?**

Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact the primary researcher Tinesha Woods-Wells at tineshaw2@vt.edu / (708) 703-2866, or the research advisors Dr. Curt Friedel at cfriedel@vt.edu, or Dr. Megan Siebel at mseibel@vt.edu.

Should you have any questions or concerns about the study’s conduct or your rights as a research subject, or need to report a research-related injury or event, you may contact the VT IRB Chair, David M. Moore at moored@vt.edu or (540) 231-4991.

*This is an auto-generated email. Please do not reply to this email address.*

If you have technical questions, please contact Pearson Technical Support by emailing catechnicalsupport@pearson.com or calling 800-249-0659, Monday through Friday, from 7:00 AM - 6:00 PM CST.