

2021

Perceptions and Experiences of African American AmeriCorps Program Participants

Dean Michael Hindenlang
Walden University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Public Administration Commons](#), and the [Public Policy Commons](#)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Collection at ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu.

Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Dean M. Hindenlang

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Gary Kelsey, Committee Chairperson,
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Dr. Anne Hacker, Committee Member,
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Dr. Michael Brewer, University Reviewer,
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2021

Abstract

Perceptions and Experiences of African American AmeriCorps Program Participants

by

Dean M. Hindenlang

M.S., Franklin University, 2017

M.P.A., Franklin University, 2015

B.A., The Ohio State University, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

November 2021

Abstract

AmeriCorps, a voluntary public service program founded in 1993, has largely consisted of a nonminority middle-class group, generally 20 to 29 years old, who had the financial assistance of family while serving. African American participants may be experiencing AmeriCorps-based programs differently, in areas such as financial solvency, job readiness skills, and the ability to begin or return to college. This qualitative study was designed to reveal the perceptions and experiences of African American participants who have completed AmeriCorps service in a Midwest metropolis. Using the lens of critical race theory, which explored African American Corps members through a historical position of disadvantage. This study was conducted using group characteristics sampling of nine participants. In-depth interviews were transcribed, and data were coded and assessed for trends related to Corps-member experiences. The data revealed that AmeriCorps-based programs have been designed for a nonminority middle class that can sustain the financial hardships of serving in communities of need, which was revealed in part by most participants receiving public assistance and the underutilization of the participant's Education Award. The results of this study may provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of AmeriCorps-based programs for African American participants. Although limited in scope, the results of the study support positive social change through the need for AmeriCorps leadership to recognize that African American AmeriCorps members may need to be supported differently from their nonminority Corps members in service.

Perceptions and Experiences of African American AmeriCorps Program Participants

by

Dean M. Hindenlang

M.S., Franklin University, 2017

M.P.A., Franklin University, 2015

B.A., The Ohio State University, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

November 2021

Dedication

I dedicate the whole of my research to rabbit holes. Without them, I would not have been able to complete my study. They have inspired a lifelong desire to remain curious about the world around me. Below me. Or beside me.

Acknowledgments

Acknowledging all of the individuals in my life who have helped me to achieve this milestone would be an act of futility as they are too numerous to name, or worse, a failure of my memory recall. There are professionals who took a chance on me, personal family and friends who supported me, and great thinkers and writers who inspired me. There are social leaders whose work was cut short by a life unfinished, community activists who toiled away to 'help create a better world,' still waiting for it to come to fruition, and every day heroes who fight injustice, intolerance, and ignorance in whatever ways they are able to do so. Each of these people helped me. One no more important than the next. It is a collective. A conglomeration of individuals who left an indelible mark on my heart, inspiring me to forge ahead, and make whatever small changes I can in this short life of ours.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background.....	2
Problem Statement.....	3
Purpose of the Study	5
Research Question	5
Theoretical Framework.....	6
Nature of the Study.....	7
Definitions.....	8
Assumptions.....	9
Scope and Delimitations	9
Limitations	10
Significance.....	11
Summary.....	12
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	14
Literature Search Strategy.....	15
Theoretical Foundation.....	17
Critical Race Theory, in Practice: Theoretical Propositions.....	18
Theoretical Historical Relevancy, Rationale, and Application.....	20
Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality	22
AmeriCorps History and Background	23

History, Vision, and Mission of AmeriCorps	24
AmeriCorps Member Demographics	25
AmeriCorps-Based Program Goals.....	26
Literature Review.....	28
Inside AmeriCorps: National Service, Motivation, and Race.....	29
African American’s Respond: Personal Finances, Job Readiness, College Bound.....	33
Systemic Barriers to Achievement: Racism, Poverty, Policy, and Community	40
Summary and Conclusions	42
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	44
Introduction.....	44
Research Design and Rationale	44
Role of the Researcher	46
An Acknowledgement of Privilege.....	47
Methodology	48
Participant Selection Logic	48
Instrumentation	50
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection	51
Data Analysis Plan.....	52
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	55
Credibility	55

Transferability.....	56
Dependability.....	56
Confirmability.....	57
Ethical Procedures	57
Summary.....	58
Chapter 4: Results.....	60
Introduction.....	60
Research Setting.....	60
Demographics	61
Data Collection	62
Data Analysis	64
The Process.....	64
Codes, Categories, and Themes	65
Discrepant Cases.....	67
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	69
Credibility	69
Transferability.....	70
Dependability	70
Confirmability.....	71
Research Results	72
Interview Question 1.....	73
Interview Question 2.....	75

Interview Question 3.....	76
Interview Question 4.....	78
Interview Question 5.....	79
Interview Question 6.....	81
Interview Question 7.....	82
Interview Question 9.....	86
Summary.....	88
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	90
Introduction.....	90
Interpretation of the Findings.....	92
A Reflection on Service Motivation.....	93
Personal Finances, Job-Readiness, and College-Bound.....	95
Extending the Link of Knowledge: Equity and Access.....	96
Critical Race Theory Meets Present Day America.....	98
Limitations of the Study.....	100
Recommendations.....	101
Implications.....	102
Positive Social Change: The Organization.....	102
Positive Social Change: The Individual.....	103
Positive Social Change: Societal.....	103
Positive Social Change: The Theoretical.....	104
Conclusion.....	104

References.....	108
Appendix A: Research Interview Questions.....	118
Appendix B: Interview Protocol.....	119
Appendix C: Aggregate Frequency Table by Participant.....	122

List of Tables

Table 1. Preliminary Coding Framework 55

Table 2. Emerging Codes: Corps Member Perceptions and Experiences 67

Table 3. Critical Race Theory, Frequency of Parent Codes 73

Table 4. Aggregate Frequency and Averages of Child Codes, by Participants 84

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The ongoing potential inequities of programs that are designed to enlist members to national public service remains an area of interest to critical race-based researchers. By more fully understanding the perceptions and experiences of African American participants who have completed AmeriCorps-based service, the data may help to enhance program effectiveness in AmeriCorps programs. Specifically assessing how AmeriCorps (or Corps) members in a large Midwest metropolis perceive their AmeriCorps-based service experience to have prepared them to meet future challenges, offers an opportunity to inform benchmarks of program efficacy. Finding employment, being financially solvent, and being prepared to attain higher education are critically important in determining whether service-based programs serve as an effective tool for African Americans to serve their community. If African American program participants are not faring as well as their European American counterparts, programming can be regulated or amended for a more equitable experience, thereby offering a more effective program for all participants.

Chapter 1 outlines the research relevant to this area of study, concisely stating the research problem and purpose of the study. In this chapter, I also state the research question and offer a theoretical framework for how the study was conducted, with a lens through which to view it. Finally, I discuss key definitions, assumptions, limitations, and the overall significance of the study and why it was worth pursuing. Each chapter section frames how the study progressed and outlines the criteria by which the study was designed. Understanding the perceptions of how African American AmeriCorps members

perceive their service-based experiences are relevant today and offer insight into a population that has lacked in-depth investigation. The research may serve as a guidepost for future studies that seek to better understand program effectiveness for African American participants of AmeriCorps programs.

Background

Although significant research exists from which to draw upon to frame this particular research inquiry, there remains a need for a more race-based assessment of how African Americans perceive their service-based experiences. With racial inequality and inequity remaining part of the daily American experience, exploring these areas offers additional and needed guidance on service motivation, especially amongst African Americans, and the limitations as to why they may choose to serve communities of need. By focusing on the perception of African American program participants, regarding their financial solvency, job readiness skills, and ability of following program participants to attend or return to college, a thorough understanding of participant perceptions can be assessed. My aim for this study was to inform the effectiveness of AmeriCorps-based programming specific to African American participants.

Literature reviewing participation in AmeriCorps-based programs has largely focused on Corps members' ability to financially manage their Corps-based service. Specifically, Ceresola (2015a, 2015b) has sought to better understand the financial constraints and financial limitations that public service places on individuals who participate in service-based experiences, such as AmeriCorps. Einfeld and Collins (2008) have sought to better understand the implications of service-based experiences on a

participants' understanding of or growth in areas of social responsibility, civic engagement, and multicultural competence, after program completion. Others have attempted to root out specific motivating factors behind public service in an attempt to more fully understand why someone would choose to take part in service-based experiences and to what extent their intentions are altruistic (Perry, 1996).

There is ample research on the generalized understanding of public service motivation, its effect on the self and community, and how individuals volunteering in service-based programs such as AmeriCorps can afford their volunteerism. There is no substantive research on the specific benefits of public service for African American participants. Notwithstanding anecdotal and generalized, shared findings, literature specific to program-level benefits of AmeriCorps for the African American participant is entirely lacking. In this study I attempted to fill a gap in the literature that is both specific to AmeriCorps and to African American participants that may offer clarity and insight into whether service-based programs are effectively meeting the dictums they proclaim to aspire to, at both the individual and collective level.

Problem Statement

Across the United States, AmeriCorps participants are largely European American, comprising almost 54% of program participants in Fiscal Year 2017 (Corporation for National and Community Service [CNCS], 2018). They are middle class, college-educated students or graduates who had sufficient financial resources before joining or while serving in an AmeriCorps-based program, a U.S. government-sponsored national social service volunteer initiative (Ceresola, 2015a, 2015b; CNCS,

2018). As most program participants receive only a nominal living allowance that may not meet their basic financial needs, many members rely on public assistance, such as supplemental nutrition benefits (Ceresola, 2015a, 2015b; CNCS, 2019). Unfortunately, research specific to minority participants regarding the impact that AmeriCorps-based programs have on their financial or educational futures is lacking (Terrana, 2017; Ward, 2019). The gap in research offers no information on whether African American AmeriCorps members are more professionally developed and job-ready upon program graduation. Nor does it offer information on whether they are better positioned to begin or return to college or are financially solvent and able to succeed after having committed to a year of public service in AmeriCorps programming.

In this study, I attempted to offer critical insight into the personal experiences of and program impact on, and effectiveness for African Americans who have completed an AmeriCorps-based program. By better understanding the effectiveness of AmeriCorps-based programs specific to African American participants, it is possible to adjust public policy where necessary. This study has the potential to help ensure that AmeriCorps is a successful program model in areas of equity and inclusion while remaining an effective program in preparing African Americans for life after program completion. These areas account for the special circumstances and considerations of minority participants, namely African Americans, seeking to engage in Corps-based experiences and community service.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the perceptions and experiences of African American participants who have completed AmeriCorps-based service in a Midwest metro area. By conducting interviews with AmeriCorps members, I sought to understand whether the program is effective for African American participants in three main areas: whether after program completion (a) members are better-positioned and solvent financially, (b) their job readiness skills and ability to attain employment have improved, and (c) they have the ability to begin or return to college.

By interviewing participants, I attempted to gain an understanding of how effective AmeriCorps-based programming is for African American participants. I also sought to offer insight into participant perceptions of financial stability, job readiness skills, and the ability to return to or begin college upon participants' Corps-based program completion. In this study I aimed for a nuanced understanding of the program's effectiveness for its African American participants, a subgroup of individuals that has gone largely unexamined to date. Finally, in this study I attempted to better understand the potential effectiveness and inequity of public, service-based programs such as AmeriCorps by helping to illuminate the personal experiences and perceptions of African American program participants and program graduates. Understanding how program effectiveness impacts perceptions of success for African Americans is especially important.

Research Question

This research was based on the following foundational question:

RQ: After program completion, how do African American participants of an AmeriCorps-based program perceive their personal finances, job readiness skills, and their ability to begin or return to college?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that I used for this study relied on Bell's (1976, 1992, 1995) legal and educational research called critical race theory (CRT). Further, Crenshaw et al.'s (1996) and Delgado and Stefancic's (2017) studies and guidance on topics of CRT were central to this inquiry. CRT offers a lens through which to examine the importance and pervasion of race and issues of racial identity and experience throughout much of American society. CRT offers an analytical understanding of the experiences of African Americans in many facets of everyday life. Additionally, Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) exploration of CRT in education offered an acute understanding of how race and identity continue to inform much of what members of the African American community experience while going about their day-to-day lives (Watkins Liu, 2018). Finally, I considered aspects of CRT and its relationship to intersectionality, as contemporary scholars acknowledge changing trends in how CRT is applied to scholarly research today (Collins & Bilge, 2018; Gillborn, 2015; Perry, 2020).

Scholars have characterized CRT as being composed primarily of four distinct components, which help to distinguish the theory from other frameworks utilized in the social sciences. Specifically, CRT is characterized by the belief that racism is embedded within society in the United States, and a recurring theme and experience for persons of color (Lynn et al., 2013). Secondly, CRT is bound by the view that 'White supremacy'

continues to have a profound effect on the U.S., its inhabitants, and especially those of non-European American ancestry, maneuvering through a racialized society. Thirdly, CRT challenges academic scholarship to view the world from a vantage point that honors and recognizes the importance of the experiences of people of color. Finally, CRT advances the belief that government agencies and institutions lack the ability to advance social change, specific to issues of embedded racism. These institutions remain central to an incrementalistic approach to combatting racism in education, justice systems, and the larger context that these institutions play within society; they are built on a foundation of racism and lack a clear path to shedding their historical structures (Lynn et al., 2013).

CRT aptly framed this research study by ensuring that this inseparable part of a person's identity remained at the fore during the research inquiry. I review the theoretical framework extensively in Chapter 2: Literature Review, offering a substantive outline and explanation for utilizing CRT as the chosen theoretical framework.

Nature of the Study

I selected a qualitative research design to guide this research inquiry. I sought to understand the perceptions and experiences of African American AmeriCorps members who have completed a service term in respect to financial solvency, job readiness skills, and their ability to begin or return to college. By utilizing CRT (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw et al., 1996; Watkins Liu, 2018), it was possible to gain insight into how African American participants perceive their experiences in and the impact of a completed AmeriCorps-based service term.

A qualitative research design ensured that each research subject was offered an opportunity to share their personal experiences. This feature allowed for nuanced details of their service term in AmeriCorps to be described and their unique viewpoints on a myriad of details to be provided that could not adequately have been captured or understood by using a quantitative design inquiry. Qualitative research inquiries allow the researcher and research subject by holistically developing a relationship that ensures that the data gathering techniques encourage a strong exchange of ideas and information. Through various styles of storytelling, including the use of personal interviews with post-program African American AmeriCorps participants, it was possible to develop a general understanding of participant experiences.

Definitions

AmeriCorps member: An individual who has committed to a specified term of service in exchange for a living allowance and Education Award; a person who is serving in a program sponsored, managed, and offered by the U.S.-government's funded CNCS (2019);

Critical race theory: A theoretical framework that offers a lens through which to understand that America is built upon a premise of racism rooted in society, that certain actions are taken to ensure European American dominance, that racism must actively be eliminated through action and discourse, and that individuals of color have value and merit in society (Bell, 1992; Savas, 2014; Watkins, Liu, 2018);

Intersectionality: A belief that recognizes the complexity of identity operating in two or more categories, such as race and gender (Delgado, 2011). Intersectionality also

aids understanding of how multiple forms of inequality and identity are connected and to what effect (Gillborn, 2015).

Assumptions

In framing this research inquiry, I made several key assumptions concerning the research participants of interest. These assumptions included but may not be limited to (a) that African American AmeriCorps members may have a unique Corps-based experience because of their race; (b) that program effectiveness can be qualified by storytelling and the perceptions of African American participants; (c) that gathering this information can illuminate potential ineffectiveness of service-based initiatives; and, (d) that financial solvency, job readiness skills, or the ability to begin or return to college are key motivators for member participation in an AmeriCorps-based program. By assuming that each of these statements is true, it was possible to conduct a study that allows for the plausibility of the study itself (Simon, 2011). The task at hand was to determine whether or not each assumption held after conducting the research inquiry.

Scope and Delimitations

This study assessed African American AmeriCorps members who have completed a Corps-based service term in a Midwest metropolis area. Through in-depth interviews, I conducted a thorough, qualitative assessment of individual and collective experiences, which I gathered, coded, evaluated, and summarized for the data analysis process (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The overarching data collection techniques and samples selected allowed for this subgroup of AmeriCorps participants to

offer information that is both relevant and timely as research participants who have recently completed a Corps-based program.

This study specifically focused on African American AmeriCorps members because as a former director of an AmeriCorps program, I am especially interested in this topic, racial group, and focus area. Finally, there was a greater possibility of transferability for African American program participants as it was likely that many of the same financial obstacles exist for this subgroup of AmeriCorps participants. As the researcher, each of these delimitations was directly within my control during the development, implementation, and assessment of the research study (see Simon, 2011).

Limitations

Two main barriers existed to the efficient and effective execution of this dissertation. As a European American researcher, it was paramount to the success of my research inquiry that I recognized my personally held European American-privilege and discussed it openly with prospective African American research participants. Secondly, as first-hand accountings of personal experiences are being disclosed, each African American AmeriCorps member would hold an understanding and a recollection of that experience that is uniquely their own. This needed to be accounted for and moderated in the design of each of the research questions and had to be accepted as a source of weakness to the overall study (see Simon, 2011). It also needed to be acknowledged and affirmed in the research findings. These limitations could not be eliminated; they could however be qualified by open and honest discourse with research participants and in how

the study was conducted. Through a transparent, congenial interview manner, many of these limitations were mitigated or accepted as points of weakness in the study.

Significance

As is demonstrated by the gap in research, there exists a proposition that many minority AmeriCorps participants, specifically African Americans, enter Corps-based service at a disadvantage for post-program sustainability because of their socioeconomic background and disparities in financial solvency. African Americans may remain underprivileged due to the humble living allowance and Education Award (CNCS, 2019) that is likely incapable of sustaining their return to college upon Corps-based program completion. Ample evidence does not exist to determine whether AmeriCorps service is effective in serving minority participants who are offered financial assistance after completing a Corps-based service term.

With this research study I sought to determine whether minority Corps members perceive their financial stability, job readiness skills, and their ability to begin or return to college more positively upon program completion. Further, I sought to answer how African American participants of AmeriCorps-based programs characterize their perceptions of program effectiveness and support. The research findings have the potential for largescale implications for service-oriented programs that are increasingly being sought after by African American participants who may otherwise lack the financial means compared to many of their European American, college-educated AmeriCorps colleagues (Ceresola, 2015a, 2015b). Ultimately, findings may suggest to AmeriCorps leaders and policy makers that program adjustments are necessary to offer

an effective program, specifically in areas of educational, financial, and job readiness skills.

Summary

Specific research does not exist to determine whether African American AmeriCorps members perceive their service-based experiences favorably or as having been effective. Nor does current research offer insight into how African Americans perceive their job readiness, financial stability, or ability to return to or begin college post-program completion. Further, sufficient literature specific to African Americans serving in AmeriCorps-based programs is not available to help offer information or guidance relevant to this topic. Drawing upon more general literature that evaluates AmeriCorps participants in a non-race-based manner was used to inform this inquiry.

By assessing the perceptions of African American AmeriCorps participants utilizing CRT as the theoretical foundation in which to frame this inquiry, an evaluative assessment of the program's effectiveness and the perceptions of African American AmeriCorps members was attained, as well as illuminating potential deficiencies in service-oriented programs that are funded by the U.S. Government (CNCS, 2019). In doing so, it was possible to contribute to a body of research that has largely been devoid of race-based assessments specific to program effectiveness. With this inquiry I sought to offer insights into the perceptions of African Americans who may benefit more wholly if their race were accounted for in the development, management, and overall intended efficacy of AmeriCorps-based programming initiatives that were specific to African American AmeriCorps members. In Chapter 2, I conduct a thorough review of the

literature, offering an understanding of the need for this inquiry while illuminating gaps in current literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Individuals seeking service-based, community-centric experiences sign up for programs like AmeriCorps for a multitude of reasons. Some choose to enroll in a service program for altruistic motives while others are unsure of what path to choose next in their developing lives (Ceresola, 2015a, 2015b). This largely European American population (CNCS, 2018) is oftentimes afforded the luxury of being able to explore their future goals and aspirations, while it has been noted that their African American counterparts are less likely to have the same or similar opportunities for exploration due to financial hardships or familial expectations of contributing to their family's finances (Terrana, 2017; Ward, 2019). Understanding whether African American AmeriCorps members are more professionally developed and job-ready upon program completion, more inclined to begin or return to college, or more financially self-sufficient after having completed a year of public service remains largely unstudied.

By understanding the personal experiences and perceptions of how AmeriCorps-based service impacts the lives of a group of African American participants in the Midwest, it is possible to better understand whether they are more financially solvent, job-ready, or better prepared to begin or return to college after completing their service term. Understanding the programmatic effectiveness of AmeriCorps-based programs for African Americans seeking to give back to their community is a relevant and timely course of study.

This chapter offers an overview of the search strategies used for the in-depth analysis of the chosen literature; the theoretical framework that I selected for this study;

the history and background of AmeriCorps programs in the United States; and the impact of AmeriCorps on African Americans' finances, job readiness skills, and ability to begin or return to college. The literature review summarizes and frames the reasoning for selecting CRT as the theoretical framework from which to inform the topic at hand. This chapter includes a literature search strategy; an explanation of the chosen theoretical framework; the history and background of AmeriCorps; and how African Americans perform in terms of personal finances, job readiness, and the ability to begin or return to college. Each section offers insight into how African Americans seeking a service-based experience have negotiated each area of interest. Although there is a solid void in AmeriCorps-specific texts relating to service experiences, other research offers substantive guidance in each topic area. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summation of themes and patterns found across the literature and an introduction to Chapter 3 and the methodology.

Literature Search Strategy

To ensure a holistic understanding of the research focus, I conducted a thorough review of both AmeriCorps- and race-based topics. Articles relevant to service-based experiences among European American and minority participants, along with AmeriCorps-based programming efforts, were identified and considered. Race-based topics that impact issues of equity and how best to engage minority communities in research when the researcher is of a different race are included and assessed for relevancy to the study. A comprehensive review of public service motivation was also considered to more fully understand why individuals choose to serve communities of need.

As most of the literature that analyzes AmeriCorps programs parse out topics such as race, reasons for program participation, financial solvency or reliance on program income, and educational pursuits of program participants, I reviewed numerous databases and search terms to ensure a holistic review of available literature. Moreover, ensuring that topics were germane to the research question required an exhaustive review of the literature that may have only peripherally touched upon topics relevant to the study at hand. I searched the following databases to achieve a comprehensive review of available research: Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy (2019), Journal of African American Studies (2020), Political Science Complete (2019), Public Administration Abstracts (2019), SAGE Journals (2019), and Thoreau multi-database (2020). The primary keywords I used in the searches were *AmeriCorps*, *African Americans*, *community service*, *critical race theory*, *intersectionality*, and *public service motivation*.

Due to the nuanced research topic, I took special care to appropriately query the selected databases in a manner that offered a comprehensive and exhaustive listing of potential research from which to draw upon. For example, querying the *African American workforce* in the Thoreau multi-database offered no search results. Searching for *African Americans* and *workforce* in the Journal of African American Studies and Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy resulted in several research articles that offered a substantive, even if dated, set of search results that were notable and relevant findings for the research inquiry. Terms such as *AmeriCorps* and *African Americans* also yielded minimal results in any of the selected databases. Most notably, when querying *AmeriCorps*, *motivation*, and *public assistance*, I located numerous articles that offered

seminal research for the study from which to begin the iterative research process (e.g., Bell, 1992; Ceresola, 2015a, 2015b; Payne & Brown, 2016; Perry, 1996).

With topic-specific scholarly research, I located ample formative articles to ensure that a holistic set of guiding viewpoints could be established from which further research could be evaluated for relevancy. Ultimately, there was no singular research source that dealt specifically with the topic of whether African American AmeriCorps members are more professionally developed, job-ready, or more inclined to return to or succeed in college after having completed a year of public service in an AmeriCorps-based program. The lack of a singular source has necessitated a more holistic assessment that ensures both depth and breadth of scholarly articles that remained germane to the topic of study.

Theoretical Foundation

African Americans seeking opportunities that allow them to offer their time, know-how, and desire to positively impact communities of need can face daunting, unexpected challenges to their willingness to serve. Seeking to understand whether African American AmeriCorps members perceive their financial stability, job readiness skills, or their ability to begin or return to college upon their Corps-based program completion favorably required a theoretical lens that honored the history of a population of individuals, while remaining agile and forward-looking in its ability to aid assessment of a nuanced set of circumstances. CRT was utilized to frame the study at hand. Although CRT has historically been utilized to frame race-based issues in education or law, the theory is well-adapted to help in evaluating issues that marginalized or minority

communities may face. Further, researchers have utilized CRT beyond race and have adopted its tenets to challenges within the LGBT community, Latinx community, and Indian American communities to frame their respective concerns with a theoretical lens that is agile in its ability to offer appropriate race-centric guidance to the research (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Originally explored in Bell, Jr.'s 1976 seminal work, "Serving Two Masters," CRT served as the theoretical lens from which to frame the assessment of race-based discourse and its impact on school desegregation litigation, including the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Herberger et al., 2020). Bell's assessment sought to challenge the belief that by requiring students to travel long distances by bus into neighborhoods that they and their parents were unfamiliar with, or by simply moving students from one building to another, desegregation could easily happen (Crenshaw & et al., 1996). Moreover, Bell acknowledged that offering African American students access to European American schools would not by itself create equity. He noted that doing so "fails to encompass the complexity of achieving equal educational opportunity for children to whom it so long has been denied" (Crenshaw & et al., 1996, p. 7).

Critical Race Theory, in Practice: Theoretical Propositions

Many scholars and practitioners have utilized CRT to frame studies that assess antidiscrimination laws, race consciousness, and cultural pluralism, in addition to addressing issues of unconscious racism (Crenshaw & et al., 1996). Education remains the dominant topic of CRT utilization, as many scholars recognize the overarching significance of an educated populace being necessary to achieve a higher social status.

CRT is in opposition to the legal belief that the law is a transformative power within society; rather, CRT posits that there exists inherent racism within the practice of law and that racism is part and parcel of America's legal and social structures (Savas, 2014). These beliefs are foundational to understanding how CRT is utilized to assess race in the American educational system.

CRT first requires the acknowledgment of inequity within a system, such as the criminal justice, educational, housing, employment, or food security structures of American society. Each serves as a component of culture that impacts every American. Specifically, CRT is valuable in assessing the American educational system because it is (a) built on the premise that racism is embedded within society, (b) that certain actions are taken to camouflage European American dominance, (c) that racism must actively be eliminated, (d) that individuals of color have value and merit within society, and (e) that each of these is built upon the history of America's racialized past (Savas, 2014). Finally, CRT is relevant when assessing the educational system, because neither class nor gender is sufficient in explaining the differences in school experiences and performance for individuals of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). By acknowledging that racism is an everyday occurrence within the American educational system, CRT can help to frame the necessary activist dimension that is inherent to properly assessing and aggressively working against a racist system of oppression embedded in American culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Theoretical Historical Relevancy, Rationale, and Application

Most studies examined for this inquiry did not directly utilize CRT as the theoretical foundation from which the study was conducted. Many of the studies were imbued with underlying elements of CRT that the author may have unintentionally addressed or unwittingly assessed. Nonetheless, there is no literature from which to draw upon that explicitly evaluates whether African American AmeriCorps members perceive themselves to be more job-ready, financially stable, or able to return or begin college, post-program completion, through the lens of CRT. Studies that generally assess the financial stability, job readiness, college plans, and service motivation of AmeriCorps members do exist and have been evaluated for this research inquiry, offering substantive insight into the larger population of AmeriCorps members (Ceresola, 2015a, 2015b, 2018). Fortunately, there are similarities between CRT's assessment of educational systems and service-based programs in the United States. Acknowledging that these two areas of interest are not overtly similar does not preclude some similarities in how CRT is used to assess education from being extrapolated and used in assessing Corps-based programming.

The selection of CRT for this research inquiry is predicated on several key components, historically associated with the theoretical foundation, including (a) the historical context of racism in CRT-based research (Savas, 2014); (b) the proposition that gender- and class-based frameworks are inadequate in explaining ongoing inequity within the United States (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); and, this research inquiry not only seeks to better understand the perceptions of African American AmeriCorps members

concerning three distinct criteria but also contains a strong desire to effect social change, for individuals who may be benefitting less than their European American counterparts, due to inherent programmatic inequities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). When viewed holistically, each of these components offers a strong foundation from which to thoroughly review the perceptions of African American Corps members. It is essential to this understanding that history is honored, that race is an essential aspect of inequity within the United States, and effecting positive social change requires the use of a theory that allows for a multidimensional assessment of the problem.

Although Ceresola (2015a, 2015b; 2018) has largely contributed to a greater understanding of how AmeriCorps-based programs impact program participants, perceptions and reasoning behind serving communities of need, and how economic challenges of a service-based program are addressed, there is minimal evaluative insight into how race may contribute or exacerbate many of the noted issues with AmeriCorps service programs. Moreover, by utilizing CRT to assess how African American AmeriCorps members perceive similar issues, racial inequities within government-based service programs can be underlined to help offer insight into how programming opportunities and overall effectiveness can be regulated or amended for a more equitable experience. Finally, by utilizing the theoretical framework of CRT, it is possible to more wholly understand the challenges that African Americans face when choosing to participate in a service-based program that is centered upon the premise of giving back to communities in need.

Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality

As issues of race continue to permeate much of American society, it has become increasingly difficult to address CRT without recognizing the importance and role that intersectionality has in relationship to the theoretical framework. Coined by race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1995, intersectionality has become increasingly important as it offers a roadmap to address the real-world issues of maintaining various identities, which are interconnected with inequality (Gillborn, 2015). Where CRT serves to inform a theoretical understanding and lens from which to view what is happening within society from an academic paradigm, intersectionality serves to offer guidance to various forms of lived-inequalities, serving as a real-world guidepost to its academic other.

Recognizing that CRT serves a theoretical function from which to view issues of inequality, scholars have increasingly turned to intersectionality to set about moving CRT-based theory beyond academia and into real-world practice. Delgado (2011) noted that intersectionality serves an important role, recognizing the duality (or plurality) that several identities have on issues of equality, including gender and race, or race and socioeconomic status, for example. There is widespread acceptance among race scholars and practitioners that issues of equality are not contained within a singular aspect of an individual's identity. These issues should therefore be assessed and addressed from a more global, holistically-adjusted model and approach. Both Gillborn (2015) and Watkins Liu (2018) acknowledged that intersectionality attempts to understand the importance of power within relationships; address social issues and the dynamics of race more fully; and, address social interventions, while creating a more inclusive coalition of

academics, practitioners, and activists, each attempting to promote racial equality within society and in practice.

The importance and role of intersectionality in this research inquiry are yet to be determined. However, as scholars and practitioners continue to acknowledge the significance that intersectionality has to CRT, there is reason to believe that intersectionality may be represented in the responses that research subjects address during the interview process and data collection phase. To exclude intersectionality from the overarching theoretical framework would be inattentive to contemporary research and discussions surrounding the role that CRT has in academia and society, to race-based equality and initiatives.

AmeriCorps History and Background

Joining and supporting national service endeavors appears to be an integral part of the American psyche and archetype. Dating back to World War II, enlisting large numbers of individuals to serve in domestic national service enterprises has helped to shape generations of young leaders wishing to support their local communities, engage in altruistic activities, and assist in helping to create a more service motivated legion of future leaders (Ceresola, 2015a, 2015b; CNCS, 2020b; Simon, 2002). Understanding the path that has led to today's version of AmeriCorps, is an important part of understanding and framing a discussion about the perceptions of African American AmeriCorps members and their personal experiences. Appreciating what has helped to structure one of the country's largest national service endeavors is central to improving the program's effectiveness for future program participants.

History, Vision, and Mission of AmeriCorps

Numerous U.S. Presidents have understood the importance of national service, calling volunteers to action, for generations. Early iterations of today's AmeriCorps program dates back to John F. Kennedy's desire to create a domestic national service organization, modeled after the Peace Corps, which was created in 1961. President Johnson moved the needle even further with the formation of Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) when he signed the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (Special Committee on Aging, 1988). By 1973, President Nixon made a significant leap forward in enshrining national service into America's framework with the Domestic Volunteer Service Act. The Act sought to "foster and expand voluntary citizen service in communities throughout the Nation in activities designed to help the poor, the disadvantaged, the vulnerable, and the elderly"; mainstays of future national service endeavors (National Domestic Volunteer Service Act, 1973). This seminal piece of legislation empowered the government to enable local entities to seek out opportunities that focused on community, and civic and educational initiatives, each with an energetic and innovative approach that endeavored to better the Nation.

In 1990, President George H.W. Bush enacted the National and Community Service Act that sought to offer service-learning and higher education service programs for elementary and high school students (CNCS, 2020b). Further, working with a bipartisan group of senators, President Bush helped to establish NCCC or the National Civilian Community Corps. The goal of NCCC was to field-ready civilian volunteers, whose goal was to help solve national challenges, modeled on Cold War methodologies

(CNCS, 2020b). Finally, in 1993, President Clinton enacted The National and Community Service Trust Act, which brought NCCC and the national and community service initiatives under one umbrella agency, the Commission on National and Community Service or CNCS (CNCS, 2020b). 2002 saw the advent of the USA Freedom Corps by President George W. Bush, and President Obama's 2009 Serve America Act, which helped to expand CNCS and further institutionalize the role of national service in America (CNCS, 2020a; 2020b).

AmeriCorps Member Demographics

In a July 2018 report, the CNCS (2018) assessed program enrollment for the program periods from 2015 through 2017. Although the report offers a substantive framing of the demographics of who is taking part in AmeriCorps-based programs, the report does not offer a more holistic assessment or nuanced details, such as service motivation or aspirational goals of those serving, post-program completion. There is value in knowing who is taking part in national service endeavors, as this data helps to demonstrate racial, gender, or socio-economic indicators of the background of Corps members.

As has largely been the historical norm in AmeriCorps' member participation (Ceresola 2015a, 2015b, 2018), CNCS's report of 2018 demonstrates similar trends in member enrollment (CNCS, 2018). The 2018 report includes statistics on race, gender, and age, across all national and state programs, including AmeriCorps State and National (ASN), VISTA, and NCCC. Namely, in all three years that were assessed, 2015 through 2017, European Americans made up at least 53.5 percent ($\bar{x} = 33,396$) of program

participants, in all three years. African Americans made up 22.1 percent ($\bar{x} = 13,744$) of all participants in each program year, and Latinx made up 5 percent ($\bar{x} = 2,950$), each year (CNCS, 2018). These data were self-reported by program participants, in each year a member served.

ASN, VISTA, and NCCC, programs under the AmeriCorps suite of offerings, saw female participation dwarf that of their male counterparts. Females amassed an average of 68.4 percent of program participants, while males accounted for 31.6 percent of program participants. 20 to 29-year-olds accounted for more than 65 percent of program participation in each program year, with those younger than 20 years old accounting for approximately 15 percent each year. 30 to 39-year-olds ($\bar{x} = 7$ percent), and 40 to 49-year-olds rounded out the top four age groups with approximately 3 percent of all program participants (CNCS, 2018). Although the report details the number of female and male participants in each of the AmeriCorps program areas, the report does not offer an assessment relative to a Corps member's comprehensive demographic background (program area, age, gender, and race or ethnicity).

AmeriCorps-Based Program Goals

Research of AmeriCorps-based programming and program participants has largely addressed questions of public service motivation, or why someone chooses to sign up to serve (Ceresola, 2018; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Nesbit & Brudney, 2010; Perry, 1996; and, Ward, 2019). Additional research addresses the impact of AmeriCorps-based service during or immediately following program participation; (see Ceresola, 2015a, 2015b; CNCS, 2004; Frumkin et al., 2009; and, Simon, 2002). Research that addresses

questions of program effectiveness and the perceptions of African American participants, respective of financial solvency, job readiness skills, and the ability to begin or return to college remains elusive. There is research available that helps to offer a general understanding of the benefits of member participation in a Corps-based program.

Understanding Program Goals and Outcomes

Frumkin et al. (2009) and Simon (2002) sought to better understand the impact that AmeriCorps-based programs have on their respective participants. Although neither directly assessed the program benefits or effectiveness for African American participants, their studies do offer a general review and assessment of how participating in an AmeriCorps program can be beneficial. A review of each study further offers evidence of a gap in research that this study seeks to explore.

Simon's (2002) research tested for bias in AmeriCorps programs on its volunteer participants. Specifically, Simon sought to understand whether or not AmeriCorps was maintaining its neutrality in how programs engaged program participants. As many in Congress have long alleged that AmeriCorps' core principles wrested on shaky ground, as Corps members are offered a living allowance to help offset their obligation to national service, understanding whether participants were concluding service more politically liberal was of interest (Simon, 2002). Notably, Simon concluded that there lacked credible evidence to assert that Corps members were more liberal, post-program completion. Simon's study did demonstrate a nominal increase in participant willingness to become involved in community-based efforts, after AmeriCorps.

Frumkin et al. (2009) conducted a quasi-experimental study that most closely aligns with understanding whether or not AmeriCorps-based programs lead to participants going to college and having improved life and work skills. These skills can lead to financial solvency and being job-ready. Frumkin et al.'s (2009) result revealed that participation in an AmeriCorps program offered no significant impact on Corps members' educational or degree attainment, as was suspected. The study did however indicate both behavioral and attitudinal impacts on the employment outcomes of those having served in an AmeriCorps program. Understanding AmeriCorps-based program efficacy in a larger context directly impacts the understanding of efficacy for African American program participants.

Literature Review

To ensure that this proposed study is appropriately and justifiably engaging post-program African American members of AmeriCorps programs, it is essential to holistically evaluate how African Americans have fared in other aspects of job readiness, financial solvency, and the ability to return to or begin college. This task can be completed through the review, assessment, and evaluation of critical research inquiries that have similarly engaged this study. Each of the referenced articles or texts listed below helps to illustrate the need for or demonstrates the lack of appropriate discourse on the research inquiry at hand. Each section offers a relevant and sometimes nuanced engagement of how or if African American members of AmeriCorps-based programs are more financially solvent, job-ready, or able to begin college, in a world that is ever-veiled by a racialized existence and conscious-color maneuvering.

Inside AmeriCorps: National Service, Motivation, and Race

Understanding National Service

AmeriCorps is one of three national service programs that is offered through the CNCS, focusing specifically on areas of economic opportunity, disaster relief, education, veterans and their families, and helping to build healthy futures. Each affiliation that AmeriCorps fosters focuses on communities of need, partnering with local nonprofit organizations, governments, and faith-based institutions, each focused on serving their local community. CNCS serves to, “improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering,” all by enrolling some 300,000 volunteers, in 45 different locations across the United States (CNCS, 2019). AmeriCorps’ Education Award, living allowance, and professional skill-building benefits are advertised as pillars to serving in AmeriCorps, within some of the neediest U.S. communities (CNCS, 2020).

Frumkin et al. (2009) conducted a stratified impact analysis and assessment of national service on AmeriCorps participants’ attitudes and behaviors, assessing more than 2,000 AmeriCorps members. The study sought to determine whether AmeriCorps participation increases civic engagement, educational attainment, improved work skills, life skills, the tolerance of non-like groups, and the length at which the effects persist, post-program completion if any (Frumkin et al., 2009). Racial or ethnic compositions of Corps members were not accounted for within this study. Results indicated both positive short- and long-term effects from having served in an AmeriCorps-sponsored program. Frumkin (2009) noted that statistical significance (≥ 0.05) was present in areas of civic

engagement, seeking out a civic-oriented career, and constructive group interactions. However, Frumkin (2009) noted no significant impact on educational attitude or degree attainment but did note the group's acceptance of their responsibility for employment success, although somewhat uninspiring. Most notably, Frumkin (2009) reported a negative response in appreciating the cultural and ethnic diversity of members of the community that AmeriCorps members were serving ($p < 0.001$). Finally, Frumkin (2009) suggested that there remains an outsize need for a deeper understanding of how participants engage their community and national service opportunities (Frumkin, 2009).

Service Motivation

Before moving more broadly to assess how history, economics, one's neighborhood, and even family impact the success of African Americans' ability to make it in America, it is first important to understand the significance of serving communities of need. Understanding service motivation is a key component of the success of both AmeriCorps participants and the programs, in which they serve. Being able to pinpoint why someone chooses to enroll in a national service opportunity with limited extrinsic value, such as financial gain, is a key aspect to ensuring the ongoing success of community-based service initiatives.

Ceresola (2018) detailed the importance of the capital of Corps members, such as their economic, cultural, or social capital, and how their inherent capital serves them during their service term. Specifically, Ceresola (2018) suggested that cultural capital, their education, skills, and general knowledge of how the world works, directly impacts their views of the communities and members within those communities that they are

serving. Ceresola's (2018) qualitative assessment attempted to better understand what Corps members most valued from their service term, especially given their particular economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Of the 22 members surveyed, 14 mostly European American participants, or 64 percent, were raised in upper-, upper-middle, or middle-class households. The remaining eight members (36 percent) were raised in lower-class homes; a mix of European American, Latinx, and one African American (Ceresola, 2018).

Most notably, Ceresola's (2018) findings suggest that the benefits of service are vastly different, depending on the socio-economic environment in which participants are raised. The upper- to middle-class participants noted an inability to connect with the members of their service communities, while choosing to serve for the direct personal benefit of their career advancement, as a resume-builder, or simply a good job for a year or two. Whereas the lower-class participants noted a direct and overt ability to connect to the members of their assigned service communities, while seeking internal growth, and a strong desire to give back to the communities that they are most familiar with. Ultimately, Ceresola (2018) noted the inability of members from upper- to middle-class environments' having a direct, negative impact on their assigned programs, by not understanding the lived experience of those they served, nor being able to make a connection that helped to create a meaningful relationship, engendering greater care to their service community (Ceresola, 2018).

AmeriCorps Service and Race

Understanding whether or not an association between service motivation and race exists can be a daunting task. Currently, there is limited literature from which to draw upon, however, correlative texts address the intersection of social service motivation and the financial benefits of serving in programs like AmeriCorps. To glean whether or not race may impact someone's motivation in serving requires the use of a more fiscally-oriented assessment. In Ceresola's (2015a, 2015b) research, each attempt to understand service motivation and the experiences of AmeriCorps members, with limited financial reward. Specifically, Ceresola (2015a) assessed whether or not Corps members were willing to identify as poor, during their service term, as most met the guidelines required to attain federal poverty-level benefits. Ceresola (2015a) noted that most of the 22 members (14 European American; four Latinx; three Asian/Pacific Islander; and one African American) evaluated through the qualitative, snowball sampling assessment, had no prior experience with being poor, while five had utilized public assistance before entering AmeriCorps-based service.

Most Corps members utilized humor to help create an identity gap between actually being poor and identifying as poor, relying heavily on the assistance of family members, to overcome any financial shortcomings that they may have experienced from serving in AmeriCorps. Finally, the research indicated that being labeled as poor, even while serving those that are poor, denotes a negative connotation to most of the Corps members that were assessed (Ceresola, 2015a).

Ceresola (2015b) also sought to better understand the correlation amongst Corps members' pay and whether or not a financial incentive helped to create a collective identifying characteristic of members. 22 AmeriCorps members were assessed and evaluated on why Corps members enter and stay with the program; how Corps members regard their own identities within AmeriCorps; and, if the financial reward of serving in AmeriCorps helps to create a collective identity (Ceresola, 2015b). Ceresola (2015b) found that an overwhelming number of members, 81 percent, entered service because they needed a job or were seeking steady employment. Further, a majority of Corps members, 95 percent, did not enter service wanting to change the world, but rather, they needed money. This illustrates a strong contradiction to CNCS's desire of Corps members to identify with and engage their programs for the betterment of their respective communities; the *Esprit de Corps*, or a feeling of pride or fellowship in giving back to communities of need (Ceresola, 2015b; CNCS, 2020a). These studies (Ceresola, 2015a, 2015b) would have been especially intriguing in ascertaining a more representative sampling of African American Corps members. AmeriCorps enlists African American participants at 25 percent of their total enrollees, yet Ceresola's studies each had only one African American participant from which to sample (Ceresola, 2015a, 2015b).

African American's Respond: Personal Finances, Job Readiness, College Bound

To understand the nuances that African Americans experience relative to AmeriCorps-based programs, it is important to more fully understand the constraints and challenges the African American community has faced and continues to face, to this day. Working to ascertain the perception of post-program personal finances, job readiness, and

the ability to return to or begin college mandates that African American AmeriCorps participants be viewed through a lens of historical relevancy and significance. By framing the discourse to appropriately position present-day challenges, we must be willing to gather and assess the historical implications of several centuries of being limited, and unable to fully achieve equality and equity within the machination of American aspirations, or as Lofton and Davis (2015) refer to the “Black Habitus” of the African American experience. It is difficult, if not impossible to understand the present-day struggles of African Americans without recognizing, confronting, and incorporating the historical challenges of an entire people concerning their experiences at home and school, their socioeconomic status and struggles, and the unequal levels of power and opportunities sustained against them (Bell, 1992, 1995; Crowe & Ceresola, 2014; Lofton & Davis, 2015).

AmeriCorps: Job Readiness and Financial Solvency

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Bayard Rustin, and A. Philip Randolph, amongst numerous others, knew full well that African Americans would need well-paying jobs to bring about lasting changes, to several centuries of being enslaved (Forstater, 2012). Rustin and Randolph, a civil rights activist and a financial expert, respectively, worked alongside New Deal economists to bring about a government-sponsored job guarantee for individuals who were ready and willing to work while supplying for those who could not work and helping to increase the minimum wage of 1966 (Forstater, 2012). Central to the deal was the promise of public service employment, providing for full employment, and the reduction of those in poverty (Forstater, 2012). As

The Freedom Budget approaches its 55th anniversary, it is important to note how instrumental and long-lasting the proposal that Rustin and Randolph made to achieving full employment, an increased minimum wage, and allowing for the working poor to see a way out of poverty for themselves (Forstater, 2012). Although not fully enacted, the budget served as a central tool to help position pay equity, especially for African Americans.

Many of the same issues surrounding pay equity of the late-1960s continue to permeate society today. Dal Borgo (2019) examines the savings habits of European American, Mexican American, and African Americans, to offer a unique perspective regarding the gaps and distribution of wealth amongst ethnic and racial groups. Notably, Dal Borgo (2019) argued that as income remains the sole contributor to actively being able to save money, additional research is necessary to more fully understand how best to reduce wealth inequality, while designing anti-poverty policies that will lessen the income disparities amongst various groups. Most financial portfolio components such as home and vehicle ownership, social security, and private pensions, generally offer a less than optimistic outlook for African Americans, only faring slightly better in terms of their overall debt to savings ratios (Dal Borgo, 2019).

This is compounded by evidence that workforce development programs continue to stress the importance of self-reliance, being financially self-supportive, and independent, while summer youth employment programs continue to stress the importance of being gainfully employed, and understanding the importance of attaining personally favorable financial outcomes for one's self (Hong et al., 2020). This particular

study (Hong et al., 2020) sought to quantify hope in employment prospects, measuring job training participation and education levels while evaluating how hopeful youth were in their ability to achieve success in employment and self-sufficiency. Racial or ethnic indicators were not evaluated in this study.

When assessing automation within the African American community, Baboolall et al. (2018) noted that the majority of the African American workforce remains in supporting roles, while the bulk of the general population is in directive-based positions, such as executive, middle managers, professionals, crafts and sales workers, and various types of technicians. That leaves the bulk of the African American workforce in roles growing at 1.5 percent (support), as compared to directive roles that are predicted to grow at 8.8 percent over the next decade (Baboolall, 2018). Moreover, as directive roles earn approximately \$69,000 per annum, compared to \$32,000 for support positions (Baboolall, 2018), it becomes increasingly clear why stressing the importance of being fiscally self-sufficient is so central to members of the African American youth workforce (Hong et al., 2020). Without outside forces helping to supplement workforce development opportunities available to the African American community, the evidence suggests that not much will change for African Americans seeking to improve their financial and employment prospects.

Being job-ready and financially solvent each remain the central goals of those signing up for AmeriCorps-based programming opportunities (Ceresola, 2015a, 2015b). Further, each aspect of service motivation seems inextricably linked to the other, as without job readiness skills, gainful employment, and steady income remain barriers to

achieving financial solvency. Separating these two aspects of Corps-based service motivation lacks a holistic understanding of how financial solvency is inextricably linked to having the skills and education to ensure financially sustainable employment.

AmeriCorps-based programming opportunities may lead with the *Esprit de Corps* (CNCS, 2020a) of giving back to communities of need, however, Corps members are more squarely focused on receiving a steady paycheck (Ceresola, 2015a, 2015b, 2018).

AmeriCorps: College-Bound

The CNCS innately understands the value of higher education, including an Education Award for individuals completing their AmeriCorps service term, as a principal benefit of program participation (CNCS, 2019). Central to this research inquiry is the goal of understanding the perceptions of African Americans, specific to their ability to begin or return to college. It is essential to this study to fully understand the historical, social, and financial limitations that many African Americans experience in being able to attend two- or four-year institutions of higher learning. Although the obstacles in accessing a college education have changed over the decades, many African Americans remain at a historical disadvantage of being able to gain college entrance (Harris et al., 2020; Herberger et al., 2020). Systemic issues of racism and segregation can be traced back to the government's ratification of the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause in 1868. Ongoing systemic racism in education continued largely unchecked until the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954, overturning almost a century's worth of education-based segregation of students in public schools (Herberger et al., 2020).

Many African American students continue to experience issues of systemic, cultural, and educational bias and racism, including, in part, the following:

- cultural bias in the classroom being directed from teachers to African American students
- resegregation within primary and secondary schools
- obstacles in completing college entrance exams, such as the ACT, due to a lack of access to advanced coursework for African American students
- difficulties in completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (also known as the FAFSA), due to its heavy reliance and requirements of having financial information readily available for both parents; a challenge to many students from non-traditional homes
- familial considerations, including caring for parents or younger siblings (Harris et al., 2020; Herberger et al., 2020; Teasley, 2019)

Ultimately, African Americans are disproportionately impacted by an outsize set of obstacles they face in seeking college admittance (Harris et al., 2020; Herberger et al., 2020; Teasley, 2019).

Being college-ready and college-bound does not begin during a student's senior year in high school, but rather, is the culmination of many years' worth of planning, coaching, implementation, and educational intervention. Sadly, the statistics on African American readiness in primary and secondary educational settings offer a stark reality to the challenges faced by many African Americans in both public and private schools. With 8.1 million African American students enrolled in public schools as of 2015, half of all

African American students attend schools where they are in the majority (Teasley, 2019). Further, European American students experience a 5.1 percent dropout rate, while their African American counterparts' drop out at 7.4 percent, which is higher than the national average. Finally, approximately 15 percent of African American students have obtained a G.E.D., as opposed to a high school diploma, bringing the total number of African Americans with a G.E.D. or high school diploma to 84.7 percent of the total U.S. population (Teasley, 2019).

During the period that the No Child Left Behind Act was in effect (2003 to 2013), both fourth- and eighth-grade math scores for African American students outpaced their European American counterparts, while ACT and SAT scores, and college admittance rates all increased for African American high school graduates (Teasley, 2019). African American students graduating from high school saw a ten percent increase in the number beginning college in the fall (from 52 to 62 percent). Those entering higher education through community college saw a decrease (an indication of whether a student completes college). While forty percent of African Americans entering college completed their four-year degree, representing just 10 percent of the nation's college graduates (Teasley, 2019).

Teasley's (2019) research on educational policies and outcomes for African American students offers numerous substantive suggestions on improving obstacles to college-bound African Americans. Teasley (2019) argues that school-based professionals need more substantial training on the environmental effects impacting African American students. This would allow for teachers and administrators to holistically care for their

African American student body, as many students have special needs that a predominately European American student body may not have. Further, shifts in a school's culture are necessary to influence the ongoing cultural biases, academic underachievement, and college readiness of African American students and are necessary to help facilitate more equitable access to education, regardless of a student's skin color (Teasley, 2019).

Finally, Teasley (2019) argues that a committed group of core leaders in a student's life, such as teachers, administrators, parents, grandparents, and community members, who are all striving for a set of comprehensive services, can best impact a student's ability to achieve academic success. By choosing to address the universal needs of a student's life, while recognizing the obstacles that many African American students are facing daily, students are best positioned to succeed in school and life. Ultimately, African American students require extensive services that help to address the multifaceted issues that many African American students are facing, from primary school through college.

Systemic Barriers to Achievement: Racism, Poverty, Policy, and Community

It is important to acknowledge that African Americans are not experiencing a singular obstacle or challenge to achieving financial stability, being job-ready, or gaining college access. Ongoing, systemic issues of racism and inequality permeate almost every facet of American life. African Americans continue to struggle with economic and social barriers, by their inability to attain fiscal resources and their lack of capacity to build strong community connections that can lift them out of poverty (Terrana, 2017). While

many African American communities are suffering from a lack of trusted and safe childcare choices, most African American students entering primary school are clustered into failing schools that have no plans for academic success (Quane et al., 2015). This epidemic of failing schools leads to one-quarter of all young, African American males that are neither employed nor seeking educational or vocational pursuits when entering adulthood. This systemic challenge ultimately leads to higher rates of incarceration for African American males (Quane et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, failing schools are only one of the root causes of this ongoing challenge to African Americans' inability to move beyond their current conflict. Additional issues of intergenerational poverty remain commonplace within the African American community, compounded by educational and employment opportunities that are nonexistent in many predominately African American communities (Payne & Brown, 2016). Lofton and Davis (2015) noted that to truly understand the African American experience, it was necessary to move beyond a class-based critique of the community, and instead focus on the racialized experiences that produce varying issues, dependent upon a person's home, school, or community. Ultimately, it is necessary to move beyond placing blame on the African American community for their current condition and begin assessing (and fixing) the systemic inequalities and community-level agency. Allowing the cultural knowledge of a community that exists to help offer substantive insights into the challenges that African Americans are facing is a realistic demonstrable action. (Lofton & Davis, 2015).

Summary and Conclusions

According to the literature, African Americans experience a myriad of obstacles in obtaining adequate job readiness skills, the ability to attain financial solvency, and the resources to return to or begin college. Unfortunately, many of these obstacles are because of systemic racism that has long been a part of America's unsavory past. Moreover, African American AmeriCorps members, and the AmeriCorps program, at large, appear to experience many of the same issues of the broader community in which it operates (Ceresola, 2015a, 2015b; Lofton & Davis, 2015). There is ample research to back up many of the themes seen within the African American community's obstacles to achieving greater access to more sustainable resources. There is, however, not sufficient research on the perceptions of African American AmeriCorps members, to adequately assess whether or not they fare better or worse than the broader community.

This research inquiry fills a gap in the literature, as government-sponsored community service programs have not been evaluated specific to members of the African American community's participation and perceptions. By assessing this population, it is possible to appropriately adjust program efforts or initiatives to bring about appropriate changes that can benefit those members of the African American community wishing to enroll in a community service-oriented program but may otherwise be left out due to any number of personal challenges.

According to the literature, being able to offer a year of service to a community of need requires a special type of person, who can temper their expectations, financial sustainability, and future aspirations, all while giving back to a community in need.

Allowing for program adjustments that help African Americans take part without further being burdened by obstacles they may already be facing, can be a benefit to the individual, the AmeriCorps program, and the community. By conducting a qualitative assessment through the lens of CRT, this research inquiry attempts to more fully understand how best to engage African Americans in AmeriCorps-based programming efforts, by determining its effectiveness in various AmeriCorps programs in a Midwest metropolis. In Chapter 3, a review of the methodology, rationale, and role of the researcher, to best accomplish the goals of this qualitative assessment are addressed.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions and experiences of African American participants who have completed AmeriCorps-based service. By conducting interviews with AmeriCorps members, I sought to understand whether the program is effective for African American participants in three main areas. Firstly, I wanted to know whether members are financially better-positioned and solvent. Secondly, I sought to understand their job readiness skills and ability to attain employment. Finally, I wanted to assess their ability to begin or return to college after program completion.

This chapter reviews the research design and rationale by assessing central concepts of the phenomenon in question. It also addresses the role of the researcher, noting any professional relationships that could impact the study, and makes known any biases or ethical issues that could adversely impact the study. Next, I present the study's methodology, detailing participant selection and the relationship between saturation points and sample size. Finally, I address issues of trustworthiness as they relate to internal validity, dependability, and confirmability. The chapter concludes with a summary of each section's main points, before introducing Chapter 4.

Research Design and Rationale

For this research inquiry I applied a qualitative research assessment using narrative inquiries and in-depth interviews. For the study I considered the following question:

RQ: After program completion, how do African American participants of an AmeriCorps-based program perceive their personal finances, job readiness skills, and their ability to begin or return to college?

The central concept of the study was to determine whether AmeriCorps-based programs are effective for African American participants in terms of financial solvency, job readiness, and college attainment. The theoretical framework of CRT was central to this study (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw et al., 1996; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995; and Lynn et al., 2013), as it allowed for a historical framing of race-based considerations and offered a guide by which to carry out an analysis of coded interview data specific to African American program participants.

I selected a qualitative-based research inquiry to ensure that the nuances of each African American AmeriCorps member's experience could adequately be described. In keeping with a positivist's viewpoint, this naturalistic research accepts that reality is constantly changing, and it is best to acknowledge that numerous versions of reality may exist for a similar group of individuals (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). As Rubin and Rubin (2012) noted regarding the responsive interview, this method allows for a depth of learning; a detailed understanding of the finer points of a topic, a vividness or realism that allows for the interviewees' story to come alive, and a nuanced positioning between various extremes between those being interviewed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

By conducting interviews via web-based video conferencing, the research participants have an opportunity to share their stories as wholly as possible, while open, honest, communication between the researcher and research participant is fostered.

Interviews allow for a deeper, more significant relationship to develop, which ultimately benefits the overall depth and breadth of the research inquiry (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This hopefully (and ultimately) leads to a research study that has allowed for a greater understanding and exchange of ideas.

Role of the Researcher

During the in-depth qualitative interview process, my role as the researcher was to participate by querying, collecting, and analyzing interview responses. Specifically, I developed, initiated, compiled, assessed, and reported on the data that were collected during the in-depth interviews (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Moreover, I was responsible for ensuring that the questions were clear, conveyed in a manner that was easily understood, and conducted equitably with all research participants.

As the researcher, I remained cognizant of any personal, professional, or intrapersonal relationships that could adversely impact the data being collected or unfairly or unduly jeopardize research subjects to some form of distress. It is therefore important to note that I held the position of director of an AmeriCorps program that is no longer operational. Although the program has now ceased operations, it is possible that members or staff who once served in other AmeriCorps programs that I directed could know who I was in my previous professional role. I no longer serve in any official or voluntary capacity in an AmeriCorps-based program. This would have been especially important if a member with whom I am familiar had been recruited to participate in this study.

An Acknowledgement of Privilege

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the inherent privilege I possessed as a male, European American, college-educated doctoral student researching African American AmeriCorps members in a Midwest metropolis. As Buford May (2014) noted when speaking of being an African American researcher assessing a European American audience, “The negotiation of power to influence the conversation is particularly difficult across racial boundaries because interviews do not occur within a vacuum, but are influenced by broader understandings of race” (p. 133). My privilege is visible for all to see; however, I cannot in good conscience conduct my research inquiry without acknowledging and in many ways owning my inherent privilege.

During a time when the belief that ‘Black Lives Matter’ is in the forefront of the national consciousness, I needed to remain aware that my race must be acknowledged as I conducted my study, especially because it is deeply rooted in the context of social change. The best way that I knew how to do this is to publicly acknowledge my privilege, and account for its potential impact on my research inquiry through open and honest dialogue. This was accomplished iteratively at the time of research subject recruitment, during candid conversations on race during the interview process, and by allowing for ample opportunities to discuss my research motivations. Also, it was furthered by remaining transparent with the research subjects in addressing questions or concerns that they expressed to me.

There was no reason to believe that any ethical issues would arise from my participation in my proposed study. As I had not served in my previous capacity for over

1 year and the program was no longer operational, and given the short tenure of most Corps members, I did not identify any conflicts of interest or power differentials in my research or its overall modeling.

Finally, overall bias mitigation can best be accomplished by employing several tactics. These include member checking, which offers a shared validity of the interview process and the data gathered (Caretta, 2019), and an acknowledgment and utilization of deliberation bias, which offers a manner in which to address time, feelings, and communication styles in the interview setting (Downey, 2015). Each technique offers an opportunity for the interviewer to have their preferences checked against a set of criteria that can help to mitigate bias in the interview process.

Methodology

The following section outlines in detail the process by which this study was conducted. Sufficient information is offered to allow other researchers to readily replicate this inquiry. Information on participant selection, data collection instrumentation, and the processes involved in obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, along with recruitment techniques, is reviewed in the following section.

Participant Selection Logic

The study's population of interest was African American AmeriCorps members who had completed an AmeriCorps-based program. The study was conducted by using the purposeful sampling strategy of group characteristics sampling, coupled with critical case analysis. This strategy is supported by Ravitch and Carl (2016), who argued that group sampling helps to reveal group patterns while offering information-rich data on the

subject of interest. In doing so, it is possible to assess how effective AmeriCorps-based programs are for African American participants living in a Midwest metropolis. I used these strategies as they each allow for maximum effectiveness for analyzing a small group of participants, such as African Americans, and making generalized assessments of their experiences in other locales.

African American participants self-identified and self-selected to participate in the research inquiry upon receiving a request to participate. An individual who self-identified as African American was permitted to join as long as all other criteria were met. Self-identification was the only criterion of race that was applied for this study. No fewer than 12 former AmeriCorps participants who identified as African Americans were to be recruited to participate in the study; however, recruitment and interviews continued until data saturation was achieved. Through this process I sought to ensure that saturation was achieved, illustrating the myriad of experiences of African American AmeriCorps participants as each individual was from the Midwest, had formerly served in an AmeriCorps program, and identified as African American (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The sample size was likely to yield either contrary experiences in great enough quantity or similar experiences to meet saturation amongst the sample of respondents, ensuring a robust data collection and analysis plan.

Participants were recruited by partnering with current AmeriCorps programs to disseminate information (flyers, email messages, or other electronic means) regarding the need for former AmeriCorps members who identify as African American to be recruited and participate in the inquiry. There is a longstanding *esprit de corps* within AmeriCorps

programs across the country. It lends itself well to bettering service opportunities for all participants with AmeriCorps programming, thereby offering itself to a general commonality of improving the human condition for all involved. This is evident in both community-based engagement and a general willingness of Corps members to assist one another, including through research-based assessments (CNCS, 2004, 2019, 2020a).

Instrumentation

Research participants agreed to answer nine in-depth interview questions, each inquiring about certain perceptions of their Corps-based experience (see Appendix A). Questions sought to better understand topics of financial solvency, job readiness skills, and the ability to begin or return to college, post-program completion. Each participant was subjected to the same questions, as is customary in in-depth interviews. It was expected that additional follow-up questions would be posed, specifically germane to the answers given and the general topic at hand (see Appendix B; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Each question has been developed by drawing upon various gaps in the literature, that once answered, sought to more substantively offer a holistic understanding of African American's Corps-based experiences and perceptions. It has been especially important to utilize aspects of CRT to help frame these questions, as the theoretical framework is central to both the inquiry at hand and the gap in the literature.

This method of data collection is best suited to a qualitative assessment that may garner numerous yet similar perceptions from those being queried. Finally, in-depth interviews allow for both the interviewee and the researcher to build upon a rapport that can help to ensure that each research subject is being addressed and queried in a manner

that best suits their skill- and understanding-level, while adhering to the established interview protocols. Ultimately, as both the subject and researcher become more familiar with one another, a camaraderie can develop, helping to engender uninhibited and useful responses to the questions posed.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

With a sample size of no fewer than 12 former AmeriCorps members, identifying as African American, the plan for recruitment, data collection, and the summarization of research findings, rested solely with me, as the researcher. Each research subject was recruited from AmeriCorps programs operating in the Midwest part of the United States. This study was authorized by Walden University's Institutional Review Board on February 12, 2021; approval number 02-12-21-0987297. Once research participants were identified, I conducted the web-based interview (due to current pandemic-related health guidelines). The data collection process was expected to last no more than 1 hour for each of the 12 research participants, although some interviews could have taken more or less time, depending upon the respondents' answers, and any necessary, clarifying follow-up questions. Each interview recording and the accompanying interview responses were assigned a unique identifier to ensure participant confidentiality. The unique identifier and the participant list are being kept in separate storage locations, isolated from the data, accessible only to me, and have no correlative characteristics that could make participant information or identity unintentionally known to others.

Each interview was recorded with audio-recording equipment, designed with redundancy measures in place; two recording devices were used during each interview to

ensure that there was appropriate collection and storage of all voice recordings. IRB protocols ensured that each research participant agreed to the vocal recording of their interview, and each research subject was required to affirmatively agree to the recording before the beginning of their respective interview period. Finally, contingency plans were developed and included in the number of respondents being recruited for the study, as was anticipated that data saturation may be achieved at less than 12 respondents, thereby ensuring that too few recruitment results are a moot point. Each interview concluded with an opportunity for the interviewee to ask any questions or address any concerns that they may have about the interview process, with issues being resolved in a congenial manner.

Finally, upon interview transcription and review, had additional questions been necessary to clarify points of interest or misunderstanding, I inquired of the particular research subject to answer additional follow-up questions, in the same manner as the originally conducted interview. All research participants were offered the opportunity to and were allowed to review their respective interview transcripts, before utilization or data extraction, for accuracy. Any issues of correction or disagreement have been noted and included in the relevant research subject's transcript of record.

Data Analysis Plan

The qualitative interview data being collected offered detailed information specific to an African American AmeriCorps members' financial solvency, ability to begin or return to college, and job readiness skills. Each qualitatively conducted, in-depth interview was coded for thematic findings, repetitive word use, and underlying issues of avoidance, hesitancy, or other characteristics that offer passive clues to issues or

concerns, during the interviews of the research participants (Saldaña, 2016). Further, CRT offers an especially important aspect from which to assess the interview responses, helping to establish a priori guidelines from which to begin the coding process.

Understanding the racial implications in each participant's statements is paramount to the thematic discoveries from within the study. Interviews were initially coded by manually assessing each transcript.

Secondary coding was scheduled to take place with web-based qualitative data coding software, such as Capterra or MAXQDA; however, hand-coding was ultimately used, at numerous intervals for redundancy and clarity. As Linneberg (2019) noted while addressing the overall importance of appropriately coding interview transcripts, "[it's] gritty craftsmanship that enables artful and creative interpretation and analysis of the data" (Linneberg, 2019, p. 261). To that end, several coding techniques have been selected to help ensure that data was appropriately moved from interview transcripts to data assessment. Discrepant cases or outliers have been noted for future research, when applicable.

Even though a pre-selected set of research questions were drafted, each interview progressed in its unique way. As each interview and its subsequent data collection and analysis iteratively took place, it was important to collect data that was as comprehensive and as informative to the topic, as possible. Moreover, as a comprehensive set of literature on the research topic is lacking, the preliminary or formative analysis of the data did require slight adjustments in word choice or the pre-selected order of the interview questions, to help alleviate confusion or offer a more robust understanding of

the research inquiry, for the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). By utilizing an appropriate first cycle coding technique that helped to frame the data being collected, it was possible to ensure that the interview process was conducted in a manner that best informed the research topic.

Evaluation coding was selected to offer a first-code to the interview responses. Evaluation coding allows for each participants' perception-based response to appropriately be evaluated against their perception and experience within an AmeriCorps-based program (Saldaña, 2016). This coding technique was especially appropriate, as it ensured that a participant's perception was considered and remained central to and respective of their interview responses. As participants were asked questions that rely heavily on their thoughts and feelings about their former Corps-based experiences and perceptions, evaluation coding allowed for an assessment of each research subject's interview responses, while ensuring the researcher could appropriately negotiate their responses respective of CRT, and concerning a priori determinations as outlined in the preliminary coding framework (Table 1).

Table 1*Preliminary Coding Framework*

Parent code(s)	Child code(s)	<i>Data collection points</i>
(Critical race theory as lens)		
Barriers to access (BA) Inherent racism (IR) Racial differences (RD) Social limitation (SL)	Financial solvency (FS)	1, 2, 3, 4
Barriers to access (BA) Inherent racism (IR) Racial differences (RD) Social limitation (SL)	Ability to begin or return to college (C)	1, 5, 6, 7
Barriers to access (BA) Inherent racism (IR) Racial differences (RD) Social limitation (SL)	Job readiness skills (JR)	1, 8, 9

Issues of Trustworthiness**Credibility**

Each interviewee was offered an opportunity to review their respective interview transcript for accuracy and precision. As credibility within an interview-based research inquiry requires the trust of both the interviewer and research subject, it is especially important to ensure that the interviews have been appropriately and accurately recorded and transcribed. Without credibility within a qualitative assessment, there is unlikely to be substantive opportunities for improvement within the social sciences or to make a pointed improvement in an area of needed social change. The proposed study maintained

lasting credibility by allowing and guaranteeing transparency between the research participants, the data being collected, and the interviewer.

Transferability

Transferability within the study is likely to be constrained by the limited scope of inquiry. As the proposed study is specifically assessing African Americans who have completed an AmeriCorps-based program, there is limited transferability outside of other geographic areas with similarly-sized metropolitan areas, with AmeriCorps-based programs that have enrolled like numbers of African American participants. Even with this limited level of transferability to other program areas, there remain opportunities to assess and extrapolate upon the findings of the research inquiry to other social service-based programs that enroll African American participants in service-based experiences. There also remains the opportunity and likelihood that other AmeriCorps programs outside of the Midwest could replicate the study to ascertain whether or not there are similar results in other parts of the country.

Dependability

As each research subject has a unique experience that is wholly their own within AmeriCorps, the results of the interviews were inherently unique, and thereby dependable, as each respondent was and can still be independently verified and confirmed. Moreover, it is within the richness of these unique and individual stories that each research subject has an experience of financial solvency, job readiness skills, and the ability to begin or return to college that is expressly their own. These unique stories add to a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perceptions of

serving in an AmeriCorps-based program for African American participants. This nuanced level of understanding is at the heart of what it means to more fully recognize and begin to assess the perceptions of African Americans in service-based programs, such as AmeriCorps.

Confirmability

Although it is unlikely that a qualitative assessment can be guaranteed with accuracy beyond reproach, there are aspects of the methodology, how the interviews were conducted, and how the data was coded that helps to corroborate the research findings. Namely, by reaching a saturation point with a sample size of 12, specific to the Midwest section of the United States, data can be collected that offers substantive findings specific to the population of interest. This level of accuracy, even if only within this small subset, lends itself to a resolute finding that can be replicated and confirmed, upon repetition of the study. In qualitative assessments, there are likely few instances that large-scale assessments can be conducted easily, or with great accuracy. In small samples, a comprehensive assessment of a specific population can likely be conducted that offers a new level of understanding about a topic or group that was previously unknown.

Ethical Procedures

Ensuring that each research subject is well-informed of their rights during the research process, is comfortable in answering the prepared questions, and has an opportunity to reflect upon their stated responses, is central to an ethically conducted study. In addition to member checking and bias mitigation techniques specific to the researcher, additional protocols were strictly adhered to as well. Obtaining necessary

consent, protecting private information, and storing audio recordings, transcripts, and interview notes securely and confidentially was utilized; password-protected files and encryption standards were adhered to, as required by IRB mandates and information technology guidelines. Although psychological, legal, economic, or professional risks are extremely low in this research study, IRB protocols and all necessary disclaimers were made available to each research subject. Before, during, and after, interviews were conducted, research standards and available participant processes were shared to ensure a maximum understanding of the options available for participation or rescission of participation. Governing guidelines of the interviews and the process for conducting the interview were made clear to each research subject. Maintaining participant anonymity, while confirming that each participant recognized that their ongoing participation was voluntary, remained a central and critical component to protecting each research subject.

Summary

Developing a qualitative-based assessment that is conducted through the use of in-depth interviews can be a challenging task, especially when a research population that has largely been marginalized for centuries is involved. To effect positive social change, studies must be developed that carefully account for the need to effect change, while being impartial, sensitive, and remain pointed in their desire to discover a previously unknown area of knowledge. As the researcher, it was my responsibility to remain especially adept at ensuring that the research participants were protected against unnecessary exploitation while developing a research study that stands on its own when replicated by others wishing to explore other aspects of this initial research query. For

African American AmeriCorps members, knowing whether or not their perceptions of their Corps-based service have impacted their financial solvency, job readiness skills, and ability to begin or return to college, can help to shape the future of program development, both within AmeriCorps-based programs, and other service-oriented efforts that rely heavily on social endeavors involving large numbers of volunteers. Next, in Chapter 4, the results of the qualitative assessment, as outlined in the preceding chapter, will be presented.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

With this research I sought to better understand the perceptions and experiences of African American AmeriCorps members in a Midwest Metropolis of the United States. Using CRT, I conducted in-depth interviews consisting of nine questions covering three main topics (see Appendix B). Through the inquiry I sought to better understand their perceptions and experiences related to their Corps-based service. Specifically, I asked how African American participants of an AmeriCorps-based program perceive their personal finances, job readiness skills, and their ability to begin or return to college. The following chapter sections detail the research findings, along with its setting, participant demographics, data collection, and the analysis used for evaluation and trustworthiness in the study, and a summary of the data points collected.

Research Setting

I conducted the study within a 50-mile radius of a major metropolitan area of the Midwest section of the United States. Each of the nine participants had participated in one of six AmeriCorps programs within the noted geographical area. Each of the six AmeriCorps programs that the nine research participants graduated from was located in an urban epicenter. While some programs also had satellite locations in more rural areas, each participant either lived in an urban setting or conducted their AmeriCorps-based service in an urban setting. Moreover, six of the nine participants' service terms were directly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic that affected the United States beginning in March, 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). While all six

participants whose service terms were impacted by COVID-19 were able to complete their program and graduate, each experienced major modifications to their original Corps-based service plan and focus areas.

For six of the participants who were actively serving when COVID-19 disrupted the way Americans were working in and serving communities of need, their respective programs adapted to ensure that they were able to complete their service terms. The modifications included extensive safety protocols for those individuals still serving in public, web-based meetings, virtual training opportunities to complete the required minimum number of hours for program completion, and adjustments to the total number of hours required for successful program completion. Although significant adjustments to the way participants gathered together and served their respective communities were adapted due to COVID-19, no participant experienced a reduction in their total weekly stipend, Education Award, or ability to graduate successfully from their program. All nine research participants met the requirements of their respective programs, thereby remaining eligible for all AmeriCorps benefits and designations upon program completion.

Demographics

Demographically, as of 2019, the area's ethnic composition was approximately 62% European American, 23% African American, 6% Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 4% with more than one race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The median income of residents was slightly over \$60,000.00 per year, but 13.4% of the total population in this area lived in poverty. Of those in poverty, approximately 25% were African American, 19% were

European American, 17% were Hispanic, 6% were Asian, and the remaining 33% were more than one race or some other race alone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

All nine research participants identified as African American and had completed an AmeriCorps-based program before being interviewed. Each participant was at least 18 years old when the interviews were conducted in March, April, and May 2021. One participant had successfully retired from her career, before joining her respective AmeriCorps program. Seven females and two males took part in the study, with each interview averaging between 45 minutes, and 1 hour and 10 minutes. Seven participants had children living in the home; four participants noted a disability that required workplace accommodations be made; and, eight out of nine (88.8%) participants had received or was currently receiving (at the time the interview was conducted) some sort of financial assistance, including food stamps, Social Security Disability Income, a Section 8 housing allowance, or financial assistance for childcare. All nine participants affirmed their participation in the study, signing the required IRB-approved consent form.

Data Collection

I recruited nine research participants from 26 IRB-approved partner organizations, each answering nine in-depth interview questions. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes, and 1 hour and 10 minutes. Follow-up questions were dependent upon the clarity and directness of the responses offered by each of the participants. Each participant successfully answered each question that was asked during the interview or noted the lack of applicability to the question or subject area. Each interview was conducted through a recorded Zoom meeting. The sessions were recorded and stored both

locally and in cloud-based servers under password-protected files or accounts and encrypted when downloaded for transcription. Each interview was completed during March and May of 2021. I transcribed interviews and then reverified and amended them for accuracy. Each transcribed interview was hand-coded during three distinct sessions dedicated to the coding process that occurred over approximately 6 weeks.

I noted in the data collection plan in Chapter 3 that data saturation may be achieved before completing all 12 interviews. As such, after the ninth interview data saturation had been achieved due to the similarity and repetitiveness between the comments and noted perceptions of all nine participants, both amongst the female and male respondents. I paused data collection after the ninth interview and concluded interview coding to affirm that a saturation point had been achieved. No new major themes or codes emerged after having completed the coding of all nine interviews that had not already been identified in the coding of the first five interviews.

I originally received IRB approval to contact seven partner organizations to have my recruitment flyer and accompanying email sent to their recent AmeriCorps graduates. However, after a key partner organization declined to assist in the dissemination of information to other AmeriCorps programs in mid-March, I immediately sought and received IRB approval to extend my partner organization pool to 26 partner organizations. This effort successfully (and expeditiously) allowed me to recruit enough qualified research participants to complete my data collection efforts and effectively achieve data saturation.

Data Analysis

The Process

Knowing I would be conducting in-depth interviews required me to fully understand the many nuances that exist within a person-to-person, inquiry-based, question-and-answer process. This is especially important when utilizing CRT, which is compounded by the fact that I am from a race that is different than those being researched (Bell, 1976; Crenshaw et al., 1996; Davis, 1997). I recognized early that my racial difference to those being researched would need to be recognized, accounted for, discussed when necessary, and that biases would need to be assessed and evaluated on an ongoing basis.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) offered a comprehensive framework from which to draw when developing my qualitative interview questions that would seek to gain insight into the perceptions and experiences of African American AmeriCorps participants. I moved from main questions to follow-up questions and then to more probing questions when an answer seemed incomplete or lacked specificity (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). By framing my questions with the understanding that qualitative codes would be assigned later, I was better prepared to write interview questions that helped to elicit direct, relevant answers from the research participants.

Next, by recognizing that interviews can be highly subjective and interpreted in many different ways depending on the reader, I relied heavily on Saldaña's (2016) seminal text, which offered a broad-stroke understanding of the importance of the general criteria for coding selection and utilization. By recognizing that coding is an iterative

process, one that likely needs to be adapted over time, I was able to think globally about my first choice of codes selected while moving more narrowly to a second cycle coding process. This helped to ensure that each time I coded my interviews, I was reading the responses anew while attempting to better understand the participant's intention, intonation, and emotions (see Saldaña, 2016).

Finally, I used both Rubin and Rubin's (2012) and Saldaña's (2016) specific guidance on qualitative, interview-based research with the assistance of Ravitch and Carl's (2016) general knowledge of data collection, specifically interviews. Having a solid foundation from which to draw, recognizing that interviews are relationship-specific and conducted within multiple contexts such as interviewer versus interviewee, and insider versus outsider, it is understandable that interviews are snapshots in time. This helped to set the understanding and framework to conduct my qualitative research inquiry knowing that research subjects are thinking, feeling, and real, not to be judged or criticized but to be listened to and taken as they are, without prejudice (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Doing so helps to build a solid foundation from which a qualitative-based, in-depth interview can be conducted.

Codes, Categories, and Themes

As was expected, numerous themes emerged over time from the responses given by the research participants. Although a preliminary coding framework had been established in Chapter 3 and aligned with the interview questions as approved, it was the emergence and repetitiveness of certain themes that helped to confirm that the participants had similar experiences and shared similar perceptions of their Corps-based

service. After the first five interviews, emergent themes began to repeat across interviews as participants described their service, perceptions, and experiences within their respective programs (see Appendix C: Aggregate Frequency Table by Participant, for the parent, child, and emergent codes assigned to the identified categories of interest in this study).

As illustrated in Table 1, there were numerous occurrences of participants either directly engaging or wishing to engage topics of professional development ($f = 40$), participants participating in self-reflective exercises that focused on their future beyond AmeriCorps ($f = 57$), and high rates of research participants wishing to be valued and have their self-worth affirmed through their Corps-based service and their service to communities of need ($f = 73$). Although it may have been anticipated during the planning stages of my research development, especially given the nature of qualitative assessments, these specific emerging themes offered a more comprehensive understanding of Corps member perceptions, expectations, and desires, when evaluating their service in an AmeriCorps-based program and in the community of need from which they served.

Each emergent code offered a robust and deeper understanding of the motivations, aspirational goals, ideologies, and state of mind of those participants who have recently completed their AmeriCorps-based programming term. These emergent codes offered the framework to engage subsequent participants, while allowing me, as a European American interviewer, the opportunity to more holistically understand the nine participants in the study. Each emergent code served as a guidepost to better understand

the nine participants who I may have otherwise presumed to understand or lacked adequate context to draw conclusions about their perceptions or Corps-based experiences.

Table 2

Emerging Codes: Corps Member Perceptions and Experiences

	Total (f)		Total (f)
Value/self-worth (VSW)	73	Program use for financial protection/assistance (FPA)	15
Self-reflection/future goals (SRF)	57	Participant assumption making (PAM)	13
Service to community (S2C)	50	Education Award - not used (EDA - NU)	9
Professional development (PD)	40	Has child/children (CH)	8
Social service benefits/section 8 Housing (JFS)	31	Unaware of program benefits (UPB)	6
Program v. participant (PVP)	26	Transportation issues (TI)	4
Disability (DIS)	20	Education Award - used (EDA-U)	3
Pandemic program adjustment (PPA)	18		

Discrepant Cases

One participant, 3F, had retired from her professional career, before joining AmeriCorps. This participant detailed situations that were greatly different experiences and perceptions of her service term, than many of the other research participants who took part in the study. Most notably, participant 3F noted on several occasions that she had utilized her financial resources to purchase supplies for the students at her assigned service location:

Well, so I'm a retired teacher. So, the stipend that is given by AmeriCorps, it's not one that you can, I don't think you can live off if you didn't have a supplemental income coming in or another income coming in. Plus, the stipend is helpful and is needed because you do sometimes buy your own materials that you use with your kids; not all the time, but you do, or you make them yourself. So, so the stipend is helpful in that way. (3F)

No other participant noted a single incidence of utilizing their own financial resources to purchase supplies, benefit the program, or felt obliged to do so, for the benefit of their assigned program recipients.

Finally, participant 3Fs overall experience and perception of her fellow Corps members offered an illuminating perspective by someone who had retired from years of service to their career. Participant 3F detailed the financial struggles that other Corps members experienced, the difficulties with reliable transportation to make it to their assigned service location, and numerous occasions of Corps members no longer being able to meet the program requirements. Much of this was attributed to the limited financial incentive of serving, compared to the other responsibilities that still had to be met such as rent, food, childcare, and other miscellany expenditures that an AmeriCorps-based program stipend did not cover. Participant 3F recounted a vastly different service experience than other research participants while offering noteworthy examples of how other Corps members struggled to meet their program requirements while meeting the personal and financial requirements of daily life.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Qualitative research rests upon the researcher's ability to demonstrate, adhere to, and maintain the highest standards of data collection and research participant respect, along with the ethical considerations of the research participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The four pillars of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are each addressed below, serving to demonstrate the highest caliber of data collection, assessment, participant respect, and relevancy, throughout the research study and beyond.

Credibility

As there was a vested interest by both the research participant and me as the researcher to better understand the research topic, participants were engaged and honest from the outset. Although some interviewees took slightly more time to warm up to me, requiring the use of probing follow-up questions, each participant approached the interview with surprising honesty and a desire for me to better understand their perceptions and experiences of their Corps-based service. All criteria for credibility established in Chapter 3 were adhered to, in full. Each participant received a transcribed record of the interview, and each participant was solicited for feedback or corrections of their transcribed record. I did not receive any comments about the transcribed files being inaccurate, transcribed incorrectly, or the essence of their meaning or word choice captured inaccurately. Each participant has received a final copy of their respective transcribed interview for their reference.

Transferability

As was previously noted in Chapter 3, transferability within the study is likely to be constrained by the limited scope of the inquiry. As the study specifically assessed African Americans who have completed an AmeriCorps-based program, there is limited transferability outside of other geographic areas with similarly-sized metropolitan areas, and with programs having enrolled like numbers of African American participants. Even with this limited level of transferability to other program areas, there remain opportunities to assess and extrapolate upon the findings of the research inquiry to other social service-based programs that enroll African American participants in service-based experiences. There is also a strong likelihood that other AmeriCorps programs outside of the Midwest could replicate the study to determine whether or not there are similar results in other parts of the country. There is little reason to believe that similar findings would not be found, if similar and like conditions of African Americans serving in urban AmeriCorps-based programs were similar.

Dependability

Each research subject had a unique experience that was wholly their own within AmeriCorps, and the results and stories shared during the interviews demonstrated that each is inherently unique. The interview transcriptions were sent to the participants for review and correction, and no notable changes were requested. The richness of these distinctive and individual stories that each participant has had, offers an opportunity to better understand the financial solvency, job readiness skills, and the ability to begin or return to college of those taking part in the study.

These unique stories add to a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perceptions of serving in an AmeriCorps-based program for African American participants. This nuanced level of understanding remains at the heart of what it means to more fully recognize and begin to assess the perceptions of African Americans in service-based programs, such as AmeriCorps.

Confirmability

Chapter 3 specifically noted that although it is unlikely that a qualitative assessment can be guaranteed with accuracy beyond reproach, there are aspects of the methodology, how the interviews are conducted, and how the data is coded that can help to corroborate the research findings. This remains accurate within this research inquiry. Each hand-coded interview can be reviewed and assessed for equity in coding, consistency in the application of codes used, and the overall evaluation of how and when codes were created and applied.

Even with a small sample size of nine participants, it is possible to replicate this study in other parts of the country. Finding other metropolitan areas with African Americans serving in an AmeriCorps-based program would not be onerous to a researcher wishing to confirm the findings of this study. Although in qualitative assessments, there are likely few instances that large-scale assessments can be conducted easily, or with great accuracy, these small samples of a specific population can be conducted, offering a new level of understanding about a topic or group that was previously unknown. The perceptions and experiences of African Americans serving in

AmeriCorps-based programs within urban areas remain an ideal population to confirm the findings of this research inquiry in other geographic areas.

Research Results

Nine African American AmeriCorps graduates participated in this research inquiry. Each participant was asked nine interview questions. All of the participants were afforded the same amount of time, attention, and communication loop, and similar feedback periods. This helped to ensure open and honest dialogue between the participants and me, as the researcher. Each participant was encouraged to elaborate on their AmeriCorps-based experiences and perceptions whenever possible.

The research results have been organized by the research question, accompanied by a reflection of the question's role within the broader theoretical framework of CRT. The results also include notable quotations from participants, whenever possible, and tables and figures to illustrate the underlying data points, whenever needed. The following results are not exhaustive, but an attempt to present data holistically, helping to articulate and illustrate how African Americans have fared within their respective AmeriCorps-based programs, in a Midwest metropolis. As such, Table 3 illustrates the frequency at which CRT underpinned the experiences or perceptions of the nine participants and their AmeriCorps-based service. While Appendix C offers a comprehensive review of each participants' frequency of parent, child, and emergent codes expressed during their respective interviews. Averages are included to illustrate the rate at which codes were present across all nine participant interviews.

Table 3*Critical Race Theory, Frequency of Parent Codes*

	Total (<i>f</i>)	Average (<i>x</i>)
Barriers to access (BA)	48	5.33
Inherent racism (IR)	39	4.33
Racial differences (RD)	9	1
Social limitations	45	5

Interview Question 1

Interview Question 1 was, “Describe your experience in the AmeriCorps program that you served.”

Data Points

Nine out of nine participants noted a desire to give back to the community or help to improve a community in need. Five out of nine participants also noted a strong desire to gain new skills, become more professionally developed, and be more marketable upon completing their AmeriCorps-based program. Four participants interpreted the question as a request for them to recount their daily assignments or general program requirements, as opposed to a more personal interpretation, such as whether or not they enjoyed their experience or had any notable challenges or issues with their AmeriCorps service, as the remaining five participants did.

This interpretive discrepancy allowed for a more well-rounded understanding of how participants prioritized their service, by better understanding which topics or themes they prioritized above others. Ultimately, the variation in responses helped to offer a more holistic assessment of how Corps members viewed their service. The variation in how the question was interpreted led to a more robust exchange between me and the

participants, as I sought to better understand their experience through probing and clarifying questions.

Question 1 and Critical Race Theory

None of the research participants articulated an experience that was rooted in a racialized context or having had perceptions of a racialized Corps-based term. Most notable, each participant reflected on the camaraderie, the networking, opportunities for professional development, and the opportunity afforded to them by having served in their respective AmeriCorps program, as being top of mind. Not until probed in later questions, did participants remark on, or suggest that issues of inherent racism or racial differences were central to their Corps-based experience. However, no barriers to access (of programs, opportunities, or people) were noted in their reflections, during Question 1.

Notable Respondent Quotes

Participant 2F said,

I will say for the most part that the program kind of helped me to become one with the community, because there was a lot that I did not know was going on in there. So, it really just made me aware of what was going on in my surroundings as well as it made me come out. So, I kind of blossomed.

Participant 2M stated

[T]he experience was a fulfilling one in summary. And I say that due to the fact that it created the opportunity to meet a lot of people from a networking standpoint, that would be the people that I worked alongside with at my primary

place which was the ... but just being in that position I was introduced to a lot of people. Some of which who I still have relationships with now.

Participant 7F added, “It was excellent. I sing the praises of AmeriCorps all over.”

Interview Question 2

Interview Question 2 was, “How would you characterize your personal financial situation, prior to joining AmeriCorps?”

Data Points

Seven out of nine participants discussed having a personal financial situation that was difficult to manage, required the assistance of financial assistance programs, or required the use of payday lending facilities or local food banks. All seven participants noted receiving one or more social service-based benefits, such as food stamps, Section 8 Housing Assistance, Social Security Disability Insurance, financial assistance with childcare, or needing to visit a local payday lender, which participant 1M noted had further exacerbated their lack of financial solvency. Two participants noted entering their AmeriCorps program without the need for financial assistance; one of them was participant 3F, who had retired from her career.

Question 2 and Critical Race Theory

The participant responses to Question 2 offered a deeper understanding of how eight of the nine participants experienced issues of barriers to accessing services, financial assistance, or social service-based processes that ultimately benefited their financial situation, before joining an AmeriCorps program. Although not directly

attributed to race, each participant articulated having had an experience, before joining their respective AmeriCorps-based program, that was similar to their fellow participants.

Notable Respondent Quotes

Participant 1F stated,

I was not in a good financial situation at the time. I was working jobs just to sustain myself. Alone like a single, in a home by myself but it just, I don't know I would still categorize myself as like low income.

Participant 5F said, "Man, it was rough. It was rough. That stipend it was not much but it made a difference for me." Participant 2M answered, "Stringent. Definitely tight at the time. Getting involved with AmeriCorps. I didn't understand fully what AmeriCorps was before getting involved. I think really at the time I was attempting to make ends meet."

Interview Question 3

Interview Question 3 was, "How have your personal finances been impacted since completing your AmeriCorps-based service term?"

Data Points

Five participants described their financial situation as "better" than when they entered their Corps-based service. However, of those five, two noted that they were still receiving some sort of financial assistance, such as food stamps or Section 8 Housing Assistance. Two participants reported having no change in their financial situation, while one noted that they were "worse off" after having completed their service term.

Overall, participants were more optimistic about their financial situation (eight out of nine participants), even when they acknowledged that they did not have additional

income being received. This was largely attributed to a better understanding of how to manage personal finances due to professional development opportunities that were offered during their service term, to help manage money. It was also attributed to having “extra” income during their service term, while also receiving public assistance.

Question 3 and Critical Race Theory

Ongoing reliance on social services was noted, after having completed Corps service, by the participants. This continued financial reliance on public assistance was noted by a majority of the research participants and is central to CRT, in that each participant expressed a barrier to accessing an improved financial standing. The same five participants also took note of their social limitations, to end reliance on financial assistance programs.

Notable Respondent Quotes

Participant 1F said, “It’s actually gotten a lot better. I learned to manage myself a lot during my time serving.” According to 2F,

I will say that it has greatly impacted it in a better way, because before, I felt like I was struggling just to make ends meet. I would stretch my disability check as far as I possibly can, and even with the income through AmeriCorps, it still just wasn’t enough. But after even the training and everything and being able to use my skills to acquire a job, now I am more self-sufficient.

Participant 4F stated, “Actually, things are changing because since completing ... it kind of uplifted me in the process of going through it because it showed me that I was worth more than I was selling myself for.” 5F said, “I was one of the people that was fortunate

to find a position that after completing AmeriCorps service, but that's starting my own business." According to 1M, "[S]o financially I would just say no like directly. Like AmeriCorps did this and it helped me financially this way, I don't know if I can draw that correlation."

Interview Question 4

Interview Question 4 was, "As an African American, what challenges are related to your financial solvency?"

Data Points

Five participants not only drew a correlation between their financial solvency and their race, but they also demonstrated a visceral reaction to the question itself. Participant 1F even thanked me for asking the question: "Thank you so much. I appreciate getting the opportunity to tell my story this way. Never have [sic] been asked these questions ever since serving so thank you." The remaining four participants did not draw direct correlations between their financial solvency and race, although participant 6F did note that they believed issues of financial solvency to be more "situational" and something that now affects all races, requiring people to be more "understanding" of one another.

Question 4 and Critical Race Theory

When asked to specifically reflect on race and financial solvency, five participants directly attributed their lack of financial solvency, barriers in accessing improved financial stability, and their social limitations, directly to their race.

Notable Respondent Quotes

5F said,

You know, it's hard. Nobody feels sorry for you, no one has compassion for you because I'm not a sympathetic figure to a lot of people. I'm not the person somebody is going to look at and feel sorry for.

7F stated,

I don't know how to get around it, I don't know how to - I don't know how to coalesce it in my brain. But the reality of the situation is as soon as someone finds out the color of my skin, it's a wrap. For whatever reason it is... What I know is that I have to - and I know that my mother has to and my brother has to and my uncle has to and my grandmother has to - circumvent the system in order to get through. There is no clear path. I am not Becky. And that's just what it is.

Interview Question 5

Interview Question 5 was, "What role did the Education Award have in your desire to serve in AmeriCorps?"

Data Points

Participant 1M noted that the Education Award was a "big" factor in their decision to take part in an AmeriCorps program. Two other participants noted that they were very excited that the Education Award was an option because they had plans to give it to their children. Although, one of the two participants was unaware of what the process was to ensure that their kid received the Education Award and was able to use it in the timeframe established by AmeriCorps guidelines.

Further, six participants noted very little or no interest in the Education Award. One participant claimed that they did not know that an Education Award was part of their

AmeriCorps-based service, although they admitted that had they known, it still would have had no impact on their decision to serve in their respective program. Several participants noted that even if they wanted to utilize the Education Award that the amount was so small that it would barely get them through a term or two of school at their local community college. The limited amount of the Education Award was noted by all five participants, who were aware of it, as a factor in their lack of interest in utilizing it, as they would only be able to begin school and not finish. They each noted that they were highly unlikely to be able to find alternative funding sources to pay for the remainder of college.

Question 5 and Critical Race Theory

As was established by CRT-scholar Derick Bell (1976), and furthered by Lynn et al. (2013), education and law are central to the original uses of CRT and the lens from which to position the African American experience. As the results indicated, barriers to accessing systems remain central to the majority of participants. Five recognized a lack of successfully accessing the education system, due to financial instability and uncertainty. Each was acutely aware of the social limitations the lack of quality, higher education would have on their ability to succeed in life, financially, and in assisting their family and the future goals that each had noted for themselves.

Notable Respondent Quotes

3F said, “[A]t first, I didn't know anything about the Education Award.” 6F stated, “I like the fact that they gave you different options and give it to your child ... as long as

[my son] graduates on time and goes straight into college, then it'll be something for his future." However, 2M said, "Very little honestly."

Interview Question 6

Interview Question 6 was, "How has the Education Award impacted your plans to begin or return to college?"

Data Points

The Education Award had very little effect on whether or not the participants will begin or return to college. Of the nine participants, seven noted that they either had no plans to begin or return to college ($f = 4$), had considered returning but had not yet made any decisions ($f = 2$), or had been in college but dropped out ($f = 1$). Of the remaining two participants, one was currently enrolled in college, while the other had no plans to return to college, noting that they had considered enrolling in some type of adult education course, which they were unsure of whether or not the Award would cover the cost of attendance.

No participant noted a direct correlation between their receiving an Education Award and their decision to begin or return to college. However, those participants that had previous education loan debt had either utilized or were attempting to utilize part or all of the Education Award for previous student loans. Two participants noted that they had no knowledge of whether their Award was still valid, how to utilize the Education Award, who to call to find out, or what steps were needed to begin the utilization process. Table 3 illustrates the frequency at which participants noted their intentions, desires, or feelings about beginning or returning to college.

Question 6 and Critical Race Theory

CRT helps to position the experiences and perceptions of each participant who noted that the Education Award would have no notable effect on their ability to begin or return to college. Even with the Education Award as an incentive to seek higher education, seven participants indicated a significant barrier to accessing college.

Notable Respondent Quotes

1F said, “Actually I do have like \$1,800.00 left that I’m going to use for next semester.” 2F stated, “[T]here were several times where I thought about actually going to college, but in the field where I was of education, I just did not know where I wanted to go. And that was my biggest issue, was where was I going to head next.” 7F said, “I know people paying money for degrees that they’re not fuckin’ using. You have a Communication degree, and you’re an English major but dude, you’re working at a call center.” 1M added, “It’s been a long time coming because like I said, I was in foster care so I didn’t have a lot of supports. But my GPA is good.”

Interview Question 7

Interview Question 7 was, “Has being an African American impacted your ability to begin or return to college? If so, how?”

Data Points

Five participants noted that they did not see a direct correlation between being African American and being able to, or wanting to begin or return to college. One participant noted the question’s lack of applicability to their current life stage, due to having completed college years earlier (Participant 3F). However, three participants

noted a strong correlation between their race and their ability to begin or return to college. Table 3 illustrates the frequency at which college, financial solvency, and job readiness were mentioned by participants, as notable considerations.

Of the three participants who viewed a strong relationship between race and returning to college, two were male, the other female, each was in their 30s, had served as a primary caregiver of younger children (siblings), had younger children in the home, or viewed the kids they helped serve in the community as part of their 'inner circle,' noting close personal bonds with those they helped to mentor. The same three participants had also navigated numerous social service-based agencies, such as their county Job and Family Services offices for food stamp benefits, childcare assistance, or Medicaid insurance. All three had experience with social service agencies that had left them feeling marginalized, "less than," and frustrated with processes that required them to navigate some sort of system or process-laden government entity. Each noted a correlation between social service agencies and benefits assisting them so that they could begin or return to college.

Question 7 and Critical Race Theory

The participant responses to question seven indicated a lack of desire to blame a barrier to accessing a system or service, or social limitations on race.

Notable Respondent Quotes

7F said,

If you are a person who is underserved economically, you can want it, you can work for it, you can sacrifice, but you still - there's no guarantee that you can

have it. So, education in America, just like the economic system in America, is designed for a certain set of people ... Education should be free for anybody who wants it. There should be alternative paths to education.

1M stated,

I will say yes. I don't even have to think too much, but the bottom line is I don't think -- people that aren't Black don't know how people look at you. You just know. It's kind of like if you're part of any group that people tend to look down on, like if you're gay or lesbian or Black or -- you can tell when somebody's looking at you and are judging you or are disgusted with you.

However, 2M said, "Fatigue was what I felt the most. Very, very fatigued."

Table 4

Aggregate Frequency and Averages of Child Codes by Participants

	1F	2F	3F	4F	5F	6F	7F	1M	2M	Total (<i>f</i>)	Average (<i>x</i>)
Ability to begin or return to college (C)	6	7	2	2	2	3	4	4	2	32	3.56
Financial Solvency (FS)	15	4	5	2	10	2	11	10	3	62	6.89
Job readiness skills (JR)	3	9	2	5	10	4	7	9	7	56	6.22

Interview Question 8

Interview Question 8 was, "What job-placement skills did you learn from your AmeriCorps service?"

Data Points

All nine participants noted an increase, development, understanding, or recognition of the job placement skills that they gained during their Corps-based experience. Some notable areas of skill attainment include an increased acknowledgment of a personal worldview, interpersonal skills, both soft- and hard skills, such as better communication and listening skills, computer skills, and time management. Others noted an increased awareness of financial planning and a greater awareness of the importance of saving money, networking, and relating to others from different racial or socioeconomic statuses.

Question 8 and Critical Race Theory

Each participant noted a strong appreciation for, and response to the professional development and job-placement skills received during their respective Corps-based service. There was a consensus that having an increased set of skills and knowledge could effectuate a change in social standing or a decrease in barriers to accessing systems or services.

Notable Respondent Quotes

2F said, “Honestly, I learned a lot. I would have to say I learned a lot, not just for skills to acquire a job but for myself.” 6F added, “[I]t showed me that your situation doesn’t define who you are. It is about what you want out of life.” 7F stated,

Asset-based community development and ground roots organizing; the key to my life... Knowing how to meet people where they are and bring them together

collectively over a singular concern that matters to them... it's a community of culture within AmeriCorps that equips you to build community.

According to 2M,

Communication is very big. And having the ability to interact with folks from all different types of backgrounds. Different creeds, different cultures. And even some...world views, that fundamentally disagree with mine. And understand that my world view is not the only world view that is out there. That the world is much bigger than that so that's a personal and professional skillset that was picked up. But leadership was also, professional leadership rather, on the job. Collaborative efforts, networking, being able to establish a rapport with different people from different, how should I say, different professional fields. So that can be working with the state, working with the government, working in the private sector, nonprofit. And being able to create almost like a hub if you will.

Interview Question 9

Interview Question 9 was, "To what degree and/or in what ways has AmeriCorps prepared you for a new job or professional endeavor?"

Data Points

Each participant spoke positively of both their service experience and their engagement with their respective community of need, even when criticizing the programs' deficiencies in helping them attain long-term employment or positioning them well for success, post-program completion. Even after recognizing the job-placement skills they had learned from their service term, all but one participant noted a lack of full-

time employment upon exiting the program. One participant had plans to enter a master's program at a four-year college; one participant was working to establish their own business; two participants were applying for jobs in the same community that they had served in; and, two participants were considering another year with an AmeriCorps program.

However, all nine participants described feeling empowered; better prepared to face their future; more engaged and aware of what communities of need are looking for, and how better to assist them; and, better able to communicate their hopes, professional aspirations, and the skills they possess to attain the type of job or career that they want to obtain. Some commonly used words to describe life after AmeriCorps included: hope, empowerment, ready, engaged, knowledgeable, community, and service. Despite their lack of a clear plan post-program completion, each of the participants felt better prepared and more professionally developed. The lingering sentiment for the majority of participants after their service term was how they were going to go about achieving their goals.

Question 9 and Critical Race Theory

By receiving skills training, access to new experiences, an expansion of professional contacts, and the ability to engage in social settings and experiences differently, each participant related their Corps-based experience to a healthier outlook on their personal and professional future. When asked, no participant reflected on the ongoing social limitations or barriers to accessing systems or services that some participants continued to experience.

Notable Respondent Quotes

1F said,

So, I'm really excited to have that opportunity, like I feel like I have leg in. I'm able to ask questions back to program officers and supervisors that I've had that I still have connection with just to make sure that I'm giving the right information that's current. So, I think, I love AmeriCorps for what it has done for me.

2F stated,

So being able to get the experience of actually physically working with these children one on one I would say was beneficial for me to be able to acquire this position that I'm in now. And a lot of the training that I received also helps me, because I have to refer back to it a lot.

According to 4F, "They aligned us with those trainings to be able to make sure that we have those tools in our tool belt." 7F added, "AmeriCorps set the framework so that I could learn how to do that, period. Without AmeriCorps, I don't know where I'd be."

Summary

The participants that took part in this study have a strong connection to their community of service, their fellow Corps members, and the program itself. Despite their acknowledgments of not being better off financially, each participant expressed an appreciation and deep sense of gratitude for having been afforded the ability to serve. They each noted that the reward was vested in their service to a community or group of people needing help, and not for the financial reward, benefit, or lack of job placement that they received from having served. Overall, the participants expressed an

overwhelming desire to serve the community, while frequently remarking on the need to be valued for their service, while reviewing their options for a better future.

Participants noted instances of experiencing or perceiving barriers to accessing systems or resources; occasions of inherent racism within the relationships or systems that they were negotiating as part of their daily experiences, during their AmeriCorps service term; and, noted social limitations for what they believed to be due to their racial identity. Most often, these instances of perceived difference, racism, or system negotiation, arose from interactions with individuals that were not African American. More often than not, these interactions occurred when interacting with European American leadership within each of the participants' respective AmeriCorps-based programs.

Even despite the challenges that many of the African American AmeriCorps graduates detailed concerning their financial solvency, ability to begin or return to college, or their job-readiness skills during their interviews, there appears to be a steadfast commitment to the program and communities of need. In Chapter 5, I will offer a greater interpretation of the findings, note the limitations of the study, make recommendations for future research, and offer thoughts on areas for positive social change and their implications. With a resulting goal of better understanding what impact this research study may have on African American participants serving in other AmeriCorps programs. Chapter 5 will conclude, noting the integration, synthesis, and evaluation of the literature and interview findings, as they relate to the study's research question.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Individuals have sought service-based experiences like AmeriCorps programs for a multitude of reasons. Some have chosen to enroll in a service program for altruistic motives while others are unsure of what path to choose next in their developing professional or personal lives (Ceresola, 2015a, 2015b). The largely European American population (CNCS, 2018) is often afforded the luxury of being able to explore their future goals and aspirations, while their African American counterparts are less likely to have the same or similar opportunities for evaluation due to financial hardships or familial expectations or requirements of contributing to their family's finances (Terrana, 2017; Ward, 2019). This study demonstrated many of the same experiences and perceptions of nine African American AmeriCorps graduates in a Midwest metropolis. Eight out of nine research participants expressed severe financial hardship, including an inability to meet their financial obligations and a lack of interest or financial means to begin or return to college once their service term was concluded.

A qualitative research design was selected to guide this inquiry, as I attempted to better understand the perceptions and experiences of African American AmeriCorps graduates specific to post-program financial solvency, job-readiness skills, and their ability to begin or return to college. Utilizing CRT (Bell, 1976, 1992, 1995; Crenshaw et al., 1996; Watkins Liu, 2018) as a framework helped me to gain insight into how African American participants perceive their experiences and perceptions of their Corps-based service. A qualitative research design allowed each research subject an opportunity to

recount their personal experiences through in-depth interviews, while I gained a deeper insight into their motivations, personal and professional challenges and opportunities, and their aspirations for their future and the future of those whom they help to care for in their home.

While each participant expressed characteristics of altruistic behavior such as service to community as a significant factor in their Corps-based service, accounting for 50 instances ($x = 5.55$) of the coded expressions (17 coded topics had lower frequency rates), most participants still had significant life struggles during their service term. They experienced issues of financial solvency ($x = 6.88$), use of social service benefits such as food stamps or Section 8 Housing Assistance ($x = 3.44$), and particularly private matters such as personal, physically limiting disabilities ($x = 2.22$), each of which had a significant impact on a participant's outlook and experience during their service term.

Finally, during each interview, participants reflected on, explained, justified, contradicted, or otherwise recognized that their race had an impact on their service experience. As the nation grapples with widespread panic about the merits and impact of CRT teachings, seven states have already passed anti-CRT laws, nine state school boards have taken steps to limit the discussion of CRT, and over 20 other states introduced legislation to sideline discussions of CRT (Ray & Gibbons, 2021). Our nation is experiencing a new awakening and energized reckoning with how racialized our country, its people, society, and the programs offered to assist those most in need truly is. CRT has become the rallying cry for the impetus to deny or ignore the impact that race has on a person's ability to improve their personal, financial, or educational opportunities in life.

The nine individuals who took part in this research study demonstrated the many ways that racial experiences and perceptions impact a person's ability to move effectually from one life stage to another.

Interpretation of the Findings

It is important to integrate the research findings into the literature that helped to position this research inquiry, particularly in the fields of public policy and administration, and within the social sciences. Firstly, it is important to reflect on how national service, personal motivation, and race have impacted AmeriCorps graduates' engagement and successes with AmeriCorps-based programming. Secondly, it is important to return to previous literature on how African Americans have fared in terms of their personal finances, job-readiness skills, and their ability to begin or return to college. Lastly, it is essential to revisit the systemic barriers to African Americans' achievement, such as poverty, community-based policies and perceptions, and the inherent racism within society that keeps many African Americans from achieving sustainable advancements in their personal and professional lives.

When reviewed in relationship to the perceptions and experiences of nine African American AmeriCorps graduates in a Midwest metropolis, a narrative emerges that explains the obstacles that require the continued use of CRT. As a mechanism with which to frame important research that is yet to be completed, CRT helps to advance policies and practices that can have a lasting impact on the lives of African Americans wishing to assist communities in need. Fortunately, this study is well-positioned within the context of previous research that has helped to frame a narrative that allows for a concise way to

continue this important conversation and assessment as it relates to financial solvency, job readiness, college, and AmeriCorps.

A Reflection on Service Motivation

Frumkin et al. (2009) conducted a stratified impact analysis study that assessed the service motivation of over 2,000 AmeriCorps members. The goal of that study, in part, was to determine whether AmeriCorps participation increased civic engagement, educational attainment, or improved work and life skills. Although Frumkin et al. (2009) did not account for race, the study offered a baseline knowledge of how to engage the participants in my study by recognizing motivators and indicators of why people serve. Statistical significance (≥ 0.05) was present in Frumkin et al.'s study, especially in areas of civic engagement, participants who sought out a civic-oriented career and constructive group interactions. However, there was no noted significant impact on educational attitude or degree attainment. Frumkin et al. did note the group's acceptance of their responsibility for employment success, suggesting recognition of the importance of planning for the future.

Similar reflections were made by those participants participating in my research study, albeit on a much smaller scale. Value and self-worth ($f = 73; x = 8.11$) were at the very top of themes that emerged during the in-depth interviews. Participants were especially aware of, concerned with, and interested in giving of their time and talent to communities of need ($f = 50; x = 5.55$), while also wanting to be valued for the contributions to both their respective AmeriCorps program and in the community that they served.

Participants also aligned with Frumkin et al.'s (2009) assessment of seeking employment in civic-minded organizations or agencies. Eight of the nine participants who were seeking employment expressed a desire to either continue working with their respective AmeriCorps program in a paid capacity or were hoping to gain employment in a similar paid position, performing work that was similar to the activities that they performed while serving in their AmeriCorps program. All eight noted a strong interest in helping communities of need while noting their need for gainful employment. Although each participant noted their desire to serve communities in need of assistance, none expressed purely altruistic motivations, as is seen when assessing service motivation across the United States (Teasley, 2019; Ward, 2019).

Finally, as was noted in the study conducted by Frumkin et al. (2009) and also suggested by Ceresola (2015a, 2015b, 2018), serving a community in need does not translate to educational attainment. Although beginning or returning to college was central to my assessment of the nine participants in my study, only one participant was in school at the time of their interview; no other participant had plans to begin or return to college. Whether the reasoning is the need for gainful employment, a lack of interest, social barriers and family obligations that lead to an inability to access education, or an inability to pay for school (Harris et al., 2020; Herberger et al., 2020; Teasley, 2019), there is little evidence to suggest that service to communities of need leads AmeriCorps graduates to begin or return to college.

Personal Finances, Job-Readiness, and College-Bound

AmeriCorps programs continue to enroll over 300,000 volunteers across 45 locations in the United States on an annual basis (CNCS, 2019, 2020). AmeriCorps touts the Education Award, living allowance, and professional skills attained through their service programs as significant benefits to those individuals participating in an AmeriCorps program (CNCS, 2020). However, of the nine research participants, seven participants had yet to use their Education Award at the time of their interview, nor could they articulate a clear path or plan on how best to ensure it was used before its expiration. All seven participants expressed concerns about being able to finish college if they started or returned, given the limited amount of the Education Award, coupled with no other financial resources to cover the cost of tuition. Three participants had been able to successfully apply their Education Award toward previous student loan debt, but all three were unsure what their remaining student loan balance was, or if they would be able to finish college in the future, given their inability to pay.

As Ceresola noted (2015a, 2015b), AmeriCorps members are acutely aware of the correlation between being job-ready and financially solvent. Ceresola (2015a, 2015b, 2018) also noted that without job readiness skills, gainful employment and a steady income remained barriers to achieving financial solvency. Being job-ready, financially solvent, professionally developed, and on par to complete Corps-based service at an advantage over their entry point were all significant considerations for eight of the nine participants in this study; one member had retired and was not concerned with her future job prospects. Being financially solvent ($f = 62$), being job-ready ($f = 56$), and topics of

professional development ($f = 40$) were major considerations for eight participants who noted continual considerations about how best to navigate their educational future while ensuring that their present financial obligations were being met.

Seven out of the nine participants suggested that they had utilized their AmeriCorps service to receive income that would not adversely impact their financial assistance benefits, such as food stamps, childcare support, or their Section 8 Housing Assistance. Each expressed an appreciation for, and recognition of how AmeriCorps programming and its financial incentives could be utilized as a stop-gap measure ($f = 15$) while they sorted out their personal finances, or worked to secure full-time, gainful employment and contributing to a community of need.

Extending the Link of Knowledge: Equity and Access

As was noted in Chapter 2, ongoing, systemic issues of racism and inequality permeate almost every facet of American life. African Americans continue to struggle with economic and social barriers, to their inability to attain fiscal resources and their lack of capacity to build strong community connections that can lift them out of poverty (Terrana, 2017). After the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis while he was in police custody (Hill et al., 2020; Dungca et al., 2020), the summer of 2020 experienced social unrest, upheaval, and continued strife not seen so openly in the United States since the 1960s.

Any delusion that African Americans are treated equally or equitably in the U.S. was laid bare, by the open, ongoing, and sustained confrontations between African Americans, members of the community in support of them, and the police who

confronted demonstrators with lopsided, demonstrable aggression (Dungca et al., 2020; Sugrue, 2020; Thomas et al., 2020). Over 1,000 instances of police brutality had been documented against demonstrators, by October 2020 (Thomas et al., 2020). The killing of an unarmed African American man catalyzed not only violent protests in many American cities but also underscored the ongoing inequities that exist within almost all facets of daily life for African Americans in America.

It could be easy to brush aside the summer of 2020, which was filled with anti-racist demonstrations as an anomaly and having no relationship to this research inquiry. However, six of the nine participants were serving in an AmeriCorps program during this summer of social unrest. African Americans serving in AmeriCorps-based programs list several systemic barriers to their personal, professional, and educational achievements. Of the nine research participants, seven experienced some level of poverty that inhibited their financial solvency, each receiving some social service-based benefit such as food stamps, childcare assistance, or a Section 8 Housing voucher. Social service benefits were noted at a frequency (f) of 34 times, or an average (x) of 3.44 times, during the nine interviews. Additionally, five participants noted incidences of community-based policies or practices that they perceived as having racial undertones or being blatantly racist in design at a frequency (f) of 39 times, or an average (x) of 4.33 times, during the nine interviews. Finally, as each interview was conducted in the early months of 2021, six of the nine participants were either serving in an AmeriCorps-based program or entering service, during the same months of the anti-racist demonstrations taking place over the summer of 2020.

Critical Race Theory Meets Present Day America

After the summer of unrest during 2020, communities and politicians continue to recoil at what they saw on the nightly news. CRT, the theoretical framework used to guide this research inquiry, is experiencing an all-out assault on its very principles and purpose. A litany of anti-CRT laws or practices is being debated and implemented from coast to coast (Ray & Gibbons, 2021). Ironically, it is likely when CRT is needed most that communities have opted to blame a theoretical framework for America's ails, as opposed to having the difficult, uncomfortable conversations about what a racist America truly looks like and how to go about working to repair it.

Many scholars and practitioners have utilized CRT to frame studies that assess antidiscrimination laws, race consciousness, and cultural pluralism, in addition to addressing issues of unconscious racism (Crenshaw & et al., 1996). Although education remains the dominant topic of CRT utilization, CRT seeks to reject the legal belief that the law is a transformative source of power within society. It also notes that racism is inherent within the practice of law and that it is part of America's legal and social structures (Savas, 2014). CRT requires the acknowledgment of inequity within systems, such as the criminal justice sector, education, housing, employment, or food systems within American society.

CRT continues to offer a roadmap from which to draw upon to help further the conversation and needed progress of race relations in the United States. As Ibram Kendi (2019) notes, "No one becomes a racist or antiracist. We can only strive to be one or the other. We can unknowingly strive to be a racist. We can knowingly strive to be an

antiracist. Like fighting an addiction, being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination” (p. 23). It is only through this awareness of self and our actions in moving against overt or subvert racist practices that American society will begin to view each member as equal amongst the many. CRT continues to inform the discussion of how best to dismantle racist ideologies and actions, and now is not the time to dismantle its important place in educational, social, or legislative settings.

By utilizing CRT for this research inquiry, I maintain that several key factors are assumed: (a) there is a historical context of racism in CRT-based research (Savas, 2014); (b) the proposition that gender- and class-based frameworks are inadequate in explaining ongoing inequities within the United States (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); and, (c) as Delgado and Stefancic (2017) offer a basis for better understanding, this research inquiry not only seeks to better understand the perceptions of African American AmeriCorps members but also contains a strong desire to effect social change, for individuals who may be benefitting from the structure of AmeriCorps, on unequal footing, due to its inherent programmatic inequities.

Research participants noted instances of experiencing or perceiving barriers to accessing systems or resources ($f = 48$); instances of inherent racism within the relationships or systems that they were negotiating as part of their daily experiences, during their AmeriCorps service term ($f = 39$); and, noted social limitations for what they believed to be due to their racial identity ($f = 45$). Each perceived instance of a racialized experience is a missed opportunity to overcome ongoing perceptions of race-based

inequities within the United States. It also serves as an opportunity for AmeriCorps participants and programs to catalyze social change, by addressing the perceptions of race-based experiences for African American participants.

Limitations of the Study

I noted two study limitations. One, that as a European American researcher, it would be paramount that I recognize my personally held European American-privilege, and discuss it openly with prospective African American research participants. Secondly, I noted that first-hand accountings of personal experiences of an AmeriCorps-based service term are perceived and experienced at the individual level and that each recounting could be imprecise or reliant on a participant's honest telling of their individual experience (Simon, 2011). I noted that each of these limitations must be accounted for in the framing of the research questions, follow-up probing questions, and an open and honest communication loop. Although noted, neither limitation proved substantive in fact or practice.

Participants were not only candid, and willing to engage in hour-long discussions about their AmeriCorps experiences and perceptions, but noted on several occasions that they appreciated being asked about their Corps-based experience, specific to their being African American. Further, if my racial background was a hindrance to my ability to effectuate an open, honest dialogue, it did not present itself in the types, scope, or thoroughness of the responses that I received. Each participant was candid and welcomed the opportunity to share their experience with me. No other notable limitations to the inquiry can be established without conjecture for their existence.

Recommendations

Several key recommendations can be made by focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of the current study. First, there is merit in replicating this study in additional urban settings, to ensure that the findings can be further supported. By conducting this inquiry in other large metropolitan areas, the findings can help ensure that this particular research setting is not an anomaly within other urban areas, containing AmeriCorps programs with adequate numbers of African American Corps members.

There is also merit to conducting similar research in rural settings with adequate numbers of African American participants to conduct a similar assessment. Knowing whether or not other factors may be contributing specifically to urban African American AmeriCorps members, could offer insight into how programs are structured, or whether or not mitigating factors for post-program success are present.

Finally, this research inquiry did not allow for a follow-up period, months or years after program completion. There could be great value in knowing whether or not African American program participants can successfully overcome issues of financial solvency, or utilize their Education Award in greater numbers, over longer periods of time. Conducting a follow-up assessment of the same group of research participants could offer greater insight into how Corps members perform or excel, not just over time, but also when allowed to utilize their newly acquired professional development skills from their Corps-based program, to further bolster their own personal and professional opportunities.

Implications

The positive social change implications of this study are only limited in scope and focus, by the willingness of those individuals most entrenched in the work of AmeriCorps-based programs. From local program directors, state entities overseeing AmeriCorps programs (both state and national, and VISTA programs), and leadership at the CNCS, much could be done to ensure a more equitable experience for all.

Positive Social Change: The Organization

Any meaningful and lasting opportunity for programmatic change should begin at the national and local levels. The CNCS has an opportunity to ensure that African American Corps members are being engaged equitably. It is disingenuous to ask Corps members to experience the same social struggles of the communities being served, when often, those African American Corps members are also members of the community in need of service. This singular program adjustment could not only ensure that African American Corps members are equitably serving, but also are offered a significant and lasting opportunity to enhance their personal and professional lives – because of their AmeriCorps service.

Additionally, local programs and program directors should seek out ways of ensuring that their African American Corps members are offered wraparound services, whenever possible. From help with bus passes, access to local food pantries, assistance with making applications for food stamps, or assisting with the Section 8 Housing voucher process, these and many other resources can easily yet significantly position African American Corps members to more successfully engage their AmeriCorps

program, stay enrolled, and graduate successfully. A lack of financial support or access to supportive services could ultimately lead to program attrition which negatively impacts a program's enrollment requirements, while also deleteriously impacting the Corps member attempting to offer service to a community of need.

Positive Social Change: The Individual

Without question, the greatest social change could be affected at the individual level. African American AmeriCorps participants have a strong and lasting desire to offer communities of need their time and talents. However, post-program completion, Corps members are left with a nominal Education Award and no clear path to effectively utilize this earned benefit. After a commitment of one year to public service, Corps members should be offered additional assurances that their earned Education Award(s) should do more than translate to a semester of tuition at a community college. There is a great benefit to engaging African Americans with a strong desire to support communities of need in public service, and their willingness to serve should be equitable in terms of their time given, to benefits received. AmeriCorps graduates fully embrace the *esprit de corps* that AmeriCorps requires of them. It is time to fully embrace African American AmeriCorps participants' desire to attend a two- or four-year program at a local community college, and in securing their college degree.

Positive Social Change: Societal

Simply stated: By helping the few, many can benefit. There was a strong desire of those who participated in this study to continue serving communities of need. By assisting African American AmeriCorps graduates in earning their degrees, there is

reason to believe that they would continue to assist communities with great social needs. Of the nine individuals interviewed for this study, not a single participant indicated that they wanted to improve their lives so they could move away from their community, or leave those that they had been serving. Each indicated that they wanted to improve their personal circumstances so that they could continue to assist others, like them, who have the greatest need of supportive services and people.

Positive Social Change: The Theoretical

CRT is a theoretical framework that offers social science researchers and practitioners a mechanism from which to view issues of historical, racial inequalities, and inequities. It is not anti-European American, anti-American, nor an attempt to re-write history. It is a theory that offers researchers guideposts from which to position the experiences and perceptions of those who are African American. Now is not the time to eviscerate CRT from its rightful place in the social sciences, but rather, should be bolstered in America's attempt to remedy 400-plus years of injustices to African American people in this country.

Conclusion

Having the opportunity to interview nine people that I likely would have never met otherwise, was an honor. Sharing in their stories, their experiences, and their perceptions of a year of service were both enlightening and discomfoting, as a European American male. Whether I like it or not, I am advantaged in ways that African Americans in this country are not; in ways that the participants of my study are not. That simple fact

was apparent as a doctoral researcher pursuing a Ph.D., while the participants in my study struggled to complete a semester or two of community college.

However, those serving in six AmeriCorps programs in a Midwest metropolis are not unique to the whole of African American society. They are a further testament to the inequities that permeate most (if not all) facets of American life; whether society believes this to be a worthwhile conversation or not. CRT may now be the moniker for the relevancy and appropriateness of race-based conversations and education in America, but it does little to quell the reality of the nine participants who experienced firsthand the perceptions of a racialized society that each must negotiate daily.

I spent months interviewing nine dedicated volunteers who chose to offer their time and talents to a year of public service. Each participant expressed a strong desire to give back to communities in need and wanted little more in return than an opportunity for a good-paying job, and the ability and financial resources to attend college. However, as Ceresola's (2015a, 2015b, 2018) research suggests, AmeriCorps programs are dominated by European Americans who will likely be offered the financial support of their families, while spending a year dedicated to a community that is vastly different than what they are used to. The nine participants in my study are all too aware of the experiences and financial hardships of the individuals they have been asked to serve, as they too are experiencing most if not all of the same types of hardships. Not a single participant in my study noted the financial assistance of family members while serving in an AmeriCorps-based program.

Most AmeriCorps programs are situated in urban epicenters that are poor, financially under-resourced, hungry, and overwhelmingly minority-filled communities. There is a reason for this. Most people that AmeriCorps programs serve look just like the nine participants that I interviewed for this study. There is irony in that fact, and reason to be angry if someone reading this is truly attempting to understand the words on the page, and the meaning behind them. These nine participants entered and exited service in vastly the same financial situation, lacking the same job prospects, and the same inability to return to college, as those persons being served by the AmeriCorps programs they were assigned to assist. Several of the participants exited service requiring additional financial assistance because of the financial burden that their AmeriCorps service term caused.

So long as AmeriCorps programs continue to seek out, heavily recruit from, and wish to engage minority populations, there will be a need to re-develop the structure of AmeriCorps programs, and their benefits, to better assist minority participants. AmeriCorps members are asked to 'live alongside' and 'experience' the same types of challenges that their community of service is experiencing (Ceresola, 2018; CNCS, 2019, 2020a). This likely worked well when middle-class European Americans made up the bulk of AmeriCorps members. However, being asked to live alongside and experience the lives of those being served, does not work so well when the Corps member lives in the same neighborhood, experiences the same financial struggles, and is locked out of the same educational opportunities, of the AmeriCorps program's recipients receiving services.

The research revealed it is time for public service programs, like AmeriCorps, to fully recognize and accommodate all of its members. More equitable AmeriCorps programs will ultimately have a stronger impact than they previously had, by serving both the Corps member and the community of need. This can be accomplished in part, by reassessing how living allowances are calculated, where African American Corps members are being asked to serve and offering adequate Education Awards that truly offer program graduates sustainable access to affordable college and not just enough money for a single term. It is time to recognize that each Corps member may have a strong desire to serve in communities of need but lacks the same financial resources, or personal and professional opportunities to fully embrace the *Esprit de Corps*.

References

- ACT, Inc. (2019). The condition of college & career readiness 2019: National. *ACT, Inc.*
- Baboolall, D., Pinder, D., Stewart III, S., & Wright, J. (2018). Automation and the future of the African American workforce. *McKinsey Insights*, 1.
- Bell, D. A. (1976). Serving two masters: Integration ideals and client interests in school desegregation litigation. *Yale Law Journal*, 85, 470-517.
- Bell, D. A. (1992). Racial realism. *Connecticut Law Review*, 24(2), 363-380.
- Bell, D. A. (1995). Who's afraid of critical race theory? *University of Illinois Law Review*, 4, 893-910.
- Blair, E. (2015). A reflexive exploration of two qualitative data coding techniques. *Journal of Methods and Measurement in the Social Sciences*, 6(1), 14-29.
<https://doi.org/10.2458/v6i1.18772>
- Buford May, R. A. (2014). When the methodological shoe is on the other foot: African American interviewer and white interviewees. *Qualitative Sociology*, 37(1), 117-136. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-013-9265-5>
- Campbell, J. L., Quincy, C., Osserman, J., & Pedersen, O. K. (2013). Coding in-depth semistructured interviews: Problems of unitization and intercoder reliability and agreement. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 42(3), 294-320.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124113500475>
- Caretta, M. A., & Pérez, M. A. (2019). When participants do not agree: Member checking and challenges to epistemic authority in participatory research. *Field Methods*, 31(4), 359-374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822x19866578>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). *COVID-19*.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>

Ceresola, R. (2015a). Doing poor in AmeriCorps: How national service members deal with living below the poverty line. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, 11(4), 116-137.

http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/Volume35/QSR_11_4_Ceresola.pdf

Ceresola, R. (2015b). What's pay got to do with it? Collective identity formation in the AmeriCorps program. *Michigan Sociological Review*, 29, 22-47.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43630963>

Ceresola, R. (2018). The influence of cultural capital on how AmeriCorps members interpret their service. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 29. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-017-9858-9>

Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2018). *Intersectionality*. Polity Press.

Corporation for National and Community Service. (2004). *Serving country and community: a longitudinal study of service in AmeriCorps*.

https://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/06_1223_longstudy_report.pdf

Corporation for National and Community Service. (2018). *Fact update: AmeriCorps: Race & ethnicity for unique individuals who serve in AmeriCorps*.

<https://data.nationalservice.gov/National-Service/AmeriCorps-Members-Demographic/2ca3-89j5>

- Corporation for National and Community Service. (2019, June 19). *A history of national service in America*. <https://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/history-national-service-america>
- Corporation for National and Community Service. (2020a, July 26). *Join AmeriCorps*. <https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/amicorps/join-amicorps>
- Corporation for National and Community Service. (2020b, July 26). *Legislative*. <https://www.nationalservice.gov/about/legislation>
- Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (Eds.). (1996). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. The New Press.
- Crowe, J., & Ceresola, R. (2014). Racial history, legacy and economic development. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 48(4), 350-369. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2014.950455>
- Dal Borgo, M. (2019). Ethnic and racial disparities in saving behavior. *Journal of Economic Inequality*, 17(2), 253-283. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10888-018-9400-3>
- Davis, D. W. (1997). The direction of race of interviewer effects among African-Americans: Donning the black mask. *American Journal of Political Science*, 41(1), 309–322. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111718>
- Delgado, R. (1984). The imperial scholar: Reflections on a review of civil rights literature. *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 132(3), 561-578. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3311882>
- Delgado, R. (2011). Rodrigo's reconsideration: Intersectionality and the future of critical race theory. *Iowa Law Review*, 96, 1247-1288.

- Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An Introduction* (3rd ed.). New York University Press.
- Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973. Pub. L. No. 93-113. (1973).
https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1973_domesticvolunteer_service_act_amendedthroughpl111_13.pdf
- Downey, B. (2015). The looking glass self and deliberation bias in qualitative interviews. *Sociological Spectrum*, 35(6), 534–551.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.2015.1064803>
- Dungca, N., Abelson, J., Berman, M., & Sullivan, J. (2020, June 8). A dozen high-profile fatal encounters that have galvanized protests nationwide. *The Washington Post*.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/a-dozen-high-profile-fatal-encounters-that-have-galvanized-protests-nationwide/2020/06/08/4fdbfc9c-a72f-11ea-b473-04905b1af82b_story.html
- Einfeld, A., & Collins, D. (2008). The relationships between service-learning, social justice, multicultural competence, and civic engagement. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(2), 95-109. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2008.0017>
- Ford, A. C., & Sassi, K. (2014). Authority in cross-racial teaching and learning (re)considering the transferability of warm demander approaches. *Urban Education*, 49(1), 39-74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085912464790>
- Forstater, M. (2012). Jobs and freedom now! Functional finance, full employment, and the Freedom Budget. *Review of Black Political Economy*, 39(1), 63-78.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12114-011-9125-z>

Frumkin, P., Jastrzab, J., Vaaler, M., Greeney, A., Grimm, R., Cramer, K., & Dietz, N.

(2009). Inside national service: AmeriCorps' impact on participants. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 28(3), 394-416.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.20438>

Gillborn, D. (2015). Intersectionality, critical race theory, and the primacy of racism:

race, class, gender, and disability in education. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(3), 277-287. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414557827>

Harris, P. N., Gonzalez, L. M., Kearney, B., & Ingram, K. (2020). Finding their

SPARCK: College and career readiness groups for African American females.

Journal for Specialists in Group Work, 45(1), 40-55.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2019.1702128>

Herberger, G., Immekus, J., & Ingle, W. K. (2020). Student, neighborhood, and school

factors and their association with college readiness: Exploring the implementation of a race- and socioeconomic-based student assignment plan. *Education and Urban Society*, 52(3), 459-488. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124519858128>

Urban Society, 52(3), 459-488. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124519858128>

Hill, E., Tiefenthäler, A., Triebert, C., Jordan, D., Willis, H., & Stein, R. (2020, May 31).

How George Floyd was killed in police custody. *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>

Hong, P. Y. P., Hong, R., & Choi, S. (2020). Validation of the Employment Hope Scale

(EHS) among summer youth employment program participants. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 111, 1-8.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104811>

- Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. Random House.
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W.F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47-68. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ519126>
- Linneberg, M. S., & Korsgaard, S. (2019). Coding qualitative data: a synthesis guiding the novice. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 19(3), 259-270. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-12-2018-0012>
- Litwack, L. (1998). The white man's fear of the educated negro: how the negro was fitted for his natural and logical calling. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, (20), 100-108. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2999249>
- Lofton, R., & Davis, J. E. (2015). Toward a Black habitus: African Americans navigating systemic inequalities within home, school, and community. *Journal of Negro Education*, 84(3), 214-230. <https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.84.3.0214>
- Lynn, M., Jennings, M. E., & Hughes, S. (2013). Critical race pedagogy 2.0: Lessons from Derrick Bell. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, 16(4), 603-628. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2013.817776>
- Miller, C. (2014). Lost in translation? Ethics and ethnography in design research. *Journal of Business Anthropology*, *Special Issue 1*, 62-78. <https://doi.org/10.22439/jba.v1i1.4262>
- Mills, J., & Birks, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Qualitative methodology: A practical guide*. Sage.
- Murayama, H., Spencer, M. S., Sinco, B. R., Palmisano, G., & Kieffer, E. C. (2017). Does racial/ethnic identity influence the effectiveness of a community health worker intervention for African American and Latino adults with Type 2

Diabetes? *Health Education & Behavior*, 44(3), 485-493.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198116673821>

Nesbit, R., & Brudney, J. (2010). At your service? Volunteering and national service in 2020. *Public Administration Review*, 70, S107-S113.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2010.02252.x>

Payne, Y. A., & Brown, T. M. (2016). "I'm still waiting on that golden ticket": Attitudes toward and experiences with opportunity in the streets of Black America. *Journal of Social Issues*, 72(4), 789-811. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12194>

Perkmann, M., & Phillips, N. (2017). Editorial: Using and developing organization theory to study innovation. *Innovation: Organization & Management*, 19(1), 1-4.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14479338.2017.1282663>

Perry, J. L. (1996). Measuring public service motivation: An assessment of construct reliability and validity. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory: J-PART*, 6(1), 5-22. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a024303>

Perry, M. (2020). Black Lives Matter, intersectionality, and LGBTQ rights now. *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education*, 18(1), 1-7.

Quane, J. M., Wilson, W. J., & Hwang, J. (2015). Black men and the struggle for work: Social and economic barriers persist. *Education Next*, 15(2), 22-29.

Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. M. (2016). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological*. Sage Publications.

- Ray, R., & Gibbons, A. (2021, July). Why are states banning critical race theory? *Brookings*. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/>
- Rhodes, C. (2019). Sense-ational organization theory! Practices of democratic scriptology. *Management Learning*, 50(1), 24-37.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507618800716>
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2012). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Rudestam, K. E., & Newton, R. R. (2015). *Surviving your dissertation: A comprehensive guide to content and process* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Savas, G. (2014). Understanding critical race theory as a framework in higher educational research. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 35(4), 506-522.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.777211>
- Simon, C. A. (2002). Testing for bias in the impact of AmeriCorps service on volunteer participants: Evidence of success in achieving a neutrality program objective. *Public Administration Review*, 62(6), 670-678. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6210.00249>
- Simon, M. K. (2011). *Dissertation and scholarly research: Recipes for success* (2011 Ed.). Dissertation Success, LLC.

- Special Committee on Aging, United States Senate. (1988). *Compilation of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973: An information paper*.
<https://www.aging.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/reports/rpt288.pdf>
- Sugrue, T. (2020, June 11). *2020 is not 1968: To understand today's protests, you must look further back*. National Geographic.
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/2020-not-1968>
- Teasley, M. L. (2019). Education policy and outcomes within the African American population. *Social Work in Public Health, 34*(1), 61-74.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2018.1562405>
- Terrana, S. E. (2017). Minority founders of community-based organizations in a neighborhood of concentrated disadvantage: Motivations, barriers, and strategies. *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance, 41*(4), 359-375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23303131.2017.1281856>
- Thomas, T., Gabbatt, A., & Barr, C. (2020, October 29). Nearly 1,000 instances of police brutality recorded in US anti-racism protests. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/29/us-police-brutality-protest>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). Quick facts. <https://www.census.gov/data/>
- Vaughn, P., & Turner, C. (2016). Decoding via coding: Analyzing qualitative text data through thematic coding and survey methodologies. *Journal of Library Administration, 56*(1), 41-51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2015.1105035>

- Ward, K. D. (2019). Suited to serve: the antecedents and perceptions of public service motivation in national service. *International Public Management Journal*, 22(1), 71-98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2017.1325805>
- Watkins Liu, C. (2018). The anti-oppressive value of critical race theory and intersectionality in social movement study. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 4(3), 306-321. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649217743771>
- Wing, A. (2016). Is there a future for critical race theory? *Journal of Legal Education*, 66(1), 44-54. www.jstor.org/stable/26402418

Appendix A: Research Interview Questions

Racial Identity & AmeriCorps

1. Describe your experience in the AmeriCorps program that you served.

Financial Solvency & AmeriCorps

2. How would you characterize your personal financial situation, prior to joining AmeriCorps?
3. How have your personal finances been impacted since completing your AmeriCorps-based service term?
4. As an African American, what challenges are related to your financial solvency?

Ability to Begin or Return to College

5. What role did the Education Award have in your desire to serve in AmeriCorps?
6. How has the Education Award impacted your plans to begin or return to college?
7. Has being an African American impacted your ability to begin or return to college? If so, how?

Job Readiness Skills & AmeriCorps

8. What job-placement skills did you learn from your AmeriCorps service?
9. To what degree and/or in what ways has AmeriCorps prepared you for a new job or professional endeavor?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Participant Identification Code: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____

My name is Dean Hindenlang and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. You were invited to take part in this research study which is about the perceptions of African Americans, who recently completed an AmeriCorps-based program, and are meeting with me because you have agreed to do so; thank you. I invited former AmeriCorps members, who completed their service term, and who self-identify as African American. 12 individuals have been invited to participate. Each interview is expected to last approximately 60 minutes, depending on how you choose to answer the questions asked, and any follow-up questions that I might have.

The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions and experiences of African American participants who have completed AmeriCorps-based service. This study seeks to understand whether the program is effective for African American participants in three main areas, including:

1. Financial stability, after program completion;
2. Job readiness skills and the ability to attain employment;
3. The ability to begin or return to college, after program completion.

Before today, you were sent a consent form to review and complete. Before beginning the interview, do you have any questions about the consent form that I can answer for you?

Either collect the consent form or note that it is already on file.

Before beginning, highlight the interview procedures, sample questions, voluntary nature of the study, risks, and benefits of being in the study, and contact information for any participant with follow-up questions or concerns.

If there are no further questions, let's get started with the first question.

Note: As the researcher, I will use several methods to elicit additional information or ask follow-up questions to better understand the responses given by the participant. For example, "Tell me how that impacted your experience.", "Could you give me an example of what you mean?", and, "What role do you believe being an African American had on that experience?"

-
1. Describe your experience in the AmeriCorps program that you served.
 - a. Probe: Do you perceive your experience as different than other members of your cohort who are not African American?
 2. How would you characterize your personal financial situation, prior to joining AmeriCorps?
 3. How have your personal finances been impacted since completing your AmeriCorps-based service term?
 - a. Probe: Do you perceive your personal finances to be better or worse since completing your AmeriCorps service term?
 - b. Probe: What could have made that experience more beneficial to your finances?
 4. As an African American, what challenges are related to your financial solvency?
 5. What role did the Education Award have in your desire to serve in AmeriCorps?
 6. How has the Education Award impacted your plans to begin or return to college?
 - a. Probe: Has the Education Award been as helpful to your college plans as you thought it would be?
 7. Has being an African American impacted your ability to begin or return to college? If so, how?
 8. What job-placement skills did you learn from your AmeriCorps service?
 - a. Probe: What do you perceive to be the most important skill you gained while serving in your AmeriCorps program?
 9. To what degree and/or in what ways has AmeriCorps prepared you for a new job or professional endeavor?
 - a. Probe (*if answered in the affirmative*): Where do you think you would be headed without these new skills?
 - b. Probe (*if answered in the negative*): How else might you have gained skills that would have better prepared you for a new job? Another program, on the job training, or something else?
-

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. Your responses are very helpful to my research study. As a reminder, your responses will be transcribed and shared with you to ensure that I have accurately captured what you said and meant in your responses. I

may have several follow-up questions if I need more information or did not accurately record your responses.

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me today. Your help is greatly appreciated.

Appendix C: Aggregate Frequency Table by Participant

	1F	2F	3F	4F	5F	6F	7F	1M	2M	Total (f)	Average (x)
Value/self-worth (VSW)	3	5	2	10	16	7	8	7	15	73	8.11
Financial solvency (FS)	15	4	5	2	10	2	11	10	3	62	6.89
Self-reflection/future goals (SRF)	0	5	0	7	13	6	10	4	12	57	6.33
Job readiness skills (JR)	3	9	2	5	10	4	7	9	7	56	6.22
Service to community (S2C)	1	5	1	9	7	7	12	4	4	50	5.56
Barriers to access (BA)	7	4	1	3	8	0	8	8	9	48	5.33
Social limitations (SL)	9	4	1	3	8	1	5	8	6	45	5.00
Professional Development (PD)	4	3	0	4	10	3	5	8	3	40	4.44
Inherent racism (IR)	0	0	0	1	6	0	12	13	7	39	4.33
Ability to begin or return to college (C)	6	7	2	2	2	3	4	4	2	32	3.56
Social service benefits/section 8 housing (JFS)	7	0	0	5	4	5	2	4	4	31	3.44
Program v. participant (PVP)	1	1	0	1	6	2	3	7	5	26	2.89
Disability (DIS)	0	2	0	8	3	7	0	0	0	20	2.22
Pandemic program adjustment (PPA)	3	0	2	4	4	1	3	0	1	18	2.00
Financial protection (FPA)	2	1	0	2	1	3	3	2	1	15	1.67
Participant assumption making (PAM)	0	2	7	0	0	0	2	0	2	13	1.44
Racial differences (RD)	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	1	9	1.00
Education Award - Not used (EDA - NU)	1	0	1	1	1	2	1	0	2	9	1.00
Has child/children (CH)	1	2	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	8	0.89
Unaware of program benefits (UPB)	0	0	2	0	3	0	1	0	0	6	0.67
Transportation issues (TI)	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	4	0.44
Education Award - Used (EDA-U)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	3	0.33