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# Afriican American Students' Experiences of Stress from Discrimination in Online Doctoral Education

Senovia Wyche
*Walden University*

# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Senovia Wyche

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Review Committee
Dr. Kimberlee Bonura, Committee Chairperson, Psychology Faculty
Dr. Rachel Piferi, Committee Member, Psychology Faculty
Dr. Karine Clay, University Reviewer, Psychology Faculty

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

Walden University
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Abstract

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Doctoral Education

by

Senovia Wyche


MA, Argosy University, 2013

BS, Life University, 2010




Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Psychology

General Psychology




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February 2020

Abstract

There is a lack of current research about the experiences of stress related to discrimination encountered by African American students in online doctoral programs. Such discrimination can negatively impact the academics, educational experiences, and overall health of this student population. In this generic qualitative study, how African American students in online doctoral programs interpreted, perceived, and responded to their experiences of stress regarding discrimination was explored. Using the conceptual framework of Lazarus and Folkman's cognitive appraisal theory, the research questions addressed stress related to discrimination encountered in online educational institutions, discriminatory factors perceived as inhibitors towards earning a doctoral degree, and coping strategies utilized. Data were collected from 8 African American online doctoral students, including 3 men and 5 women, in Skype interviews, and NVivo 12 facilitated the thematic analysis of their responses. Findings indicate that African American online doctoral students perceive that they experience discrimination from faculty and university staff and that this perception leads to stress, depression, and self-doubt. Research is recommended on distinguishing student isolation based on online educational delivery from student isolation based on discrimination, objectively measuring discrimination, and including the perceptions of professors and administrators. The results of the study can inform university administrators and policymakers about the importance of addressing issues of discrimination that can negatively influence the academic success and health of African American students.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my heavenly Father, Elohim, and my loving husband and best friend, Harry Wyche. Elohim, without your love and guidance, I would not be on this path to fulfill my purpose in life. Harry, your faith and belief in my ability to complete this dissertation was extremely essential, especially in times when I grappled with periods of self-doubt. Your presence alongside me as I traveled this unknown path is what got me through. Thank you for your words of encouragement that always uplifted and restored me. I love you!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

**Introduction**

When a student attends college (i.e., traditional or online), he/she attends with the

expectation of being treated fairly and equally without concerns regarding his/her race,

ethnicity, creed, or gender (Conaway & Bethune, 2015). However, the world is not

flawless, and discrimination is existent even on the collegial level (Conway & Bethune).

Discrimination can be more apparent at traditional educational institutions (Conway &

Bethune). In a physical classroom environment, it is difficult for students to conceal their

racial ethnicity, which makes discrimination easy to occur. Online classroom

environments are viewed as being innocuous, unbiased, safe environments, absent of

visual and verbal signals that usually precipitate unseen attitudes and biases that can

initiate undesirable behaviors (Conaway & Bethune). However, an online educational

environment may not always be a positive experience because discrimination can occur

in this environment as well (Conaway & Bethune).

Numerous studies have focused on stress related to racism and discrimination

among African American students who attend traditional educational institutions across

the United States (Baker & Moore, 2015; El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh, & Bufka,

2012; Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai 2014; Myers et al., 2012; Tynes, Rose, &

Markoe, 2013). These studies revealed similarities regarding discrimination experiences

among ethnic minority students but differed when compared to discrimination

experiences among White students (Baker & Moore; El-Ghoroury et al.; Johnson et al.;

Myers et al.; Tynes et al., 2013). Discrimination regarding gender and/or sexism, such as

gender prejudice and sexual harassment, were found to be experienced among some White students at their college institution (Brinkman, Isacco, & Rosen; Reilly, Rackley, & Awad, 2017). Racism, stereotyping, prejudice, and other stressors, such as isolation, disconnection from peers and faculty, and diverse cultural expectations, were found to be contributing factors of discrimination and stress experienced among African American and/or ethnic minority students (Baker & Moore; El-Ghoroury et al.; Johnson et al.; Myers et al.; Tynes et al.). Although research regarding the experiences of discrimination among African American doctoral students attending traditional educational institutions is bountiful (Baker & Moore; Beamon, 2014; Bentley-Edwards, Agonafer, Edmondson, & Flannigan, 2018; Brunsma, Embrick, & Shin, 2017; El-Ghoroury et al.; Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014; Jaeger & Haley, 2016; Jones, Perrin, Heller, Hailu, & Barnett, 2018; Myers et al.; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016; Williams, Burnett, Carroll, & Harris, 2016; Zeligman, Prescod, & Greene, 2015), research regarding discrimination among African American doctoral students attending classes online is limited.

The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of stress related to discrimination among African American students who are participating in online doctoral programs. It was essential for this population to express their experiences of discrimination in their own words because it provided insight for researchers, faculty, and administration in understanding why this experience was unique to them. In this study, I examined the discrimination experiences encountered in online doctoral programs. Additionally, the discriminatory factors perceived by online doctoral African American students were explored. In this study, I examined what stressors inhibited African

American doctoral students from earning a doctoral degree and what strategies they

utilized to assist them in coping with discrimination issues within the online educational

format.

The findings from this study add to existing research by providing insight into

issues pertaining to ethnicity/culture and how these issues influenced the lives of African

American students in regard to stress related to discrimination as well as how they

responded to stressors while participating in a doctoral program online. In this study, I

attempted to collect additional information regarding this population in terms of how they

described their experiences with discrimination and interactions with instructors and

colleagues while obtaining online education. Social change can be enhanced by bringing

this issue into public awareness through informing the faculty and administration in

educational institutions of the importance of understanding the perspectives, not only of

African American students, but all students from diverse cultures and backgrounds. It is

my hope that university administrators, policy makers, faculty, and staff will be able

utilize the information gathered in this study to explore additional information about how

African American doctoral students manage stressors that are distinctive to their

ethnicity/culture within the online educational format. I also hope that researchers will be

able to use the information gathered in this research study to understand how African

American doctoral students' online experiences with issues related to discrimination

differ from experiences at a traditional educational institution.

In Chapter, I discuss the background of this study. I present the research problem,

provide validation from the most current research, and address the gap in the literature on

the research topic. The purpose of this research study is discussed, and the research questions are stated. I also explain the framework that was used for this study and provide an explanation of its relevance to the study. The nature of the study and the definition of terms used in this study are presented, followed by assumptions, scope and delimitations; limitations; and the significance of the study. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a summary and a transition to Chapter 2.

## Background

The college campus can be threatening, especially for students of color where stereotyping and racial discrimination can occur. Research has indicated that African American students perceive the college campus as a hostile environment in which acts of racial discrimination, stereotyping, and daily microaggressions have been encountered (Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016; McGee, 2016; Means, 2016). African American students have reported that their educational experiences in doctoral programs consist of not being noticed, disrespectfully treated, devalued, underrepresented, and discriminated against by both ethnically majority students and faculty at their college institution (Brunsma et al., 2017; Jaeger & Haley, 2016; Zeligman et al., 2015). While research has yielded a plethora of findings regarding the aforementioned factors encountered at traditional education institutions, in this study, I intended to examine how these factors impact students in online education. Baker and Moore (2015) explored the importance of cultural competence of counselor education in regard to preparing students in working with a rapidly diversifying field. Their study provided narratives of 19 racially and/or ethnically underrepresented students and identified themes that students of color discussed

regarding institutional discrimination. Although a higher degree of college student interaction now occurs online, it is pertinent for researchers to investigate the role the Internet takes part in perceptions of racial discrimination and campus racial climate (Tynes et al., 2013; Tynes, Del Toro, & Lozada, 2015).

Baig, Khan, and Chaudhry (2014); Yeboah and Smith (2016); and Tynes et al. (2013) conducted research studies that pertained to diversity within the online learning environment in higher education. The topics explored were the behavior of online knowledge sharing, the relationship between online learning experiences and educational performances among students of color, and the role the Internet played in the perceptions of online racial discrimination. The findings suggested that when various students are given the same information, they tended to interpret the information in relation to their experiences, which brought about different viewpoints of the same information. In other words, when knowledge is shared with individuals it is usually influenced by their personal opinions and biases (Baig et al.). Additionally, their findings expressed how the presence of multiculturalism in terms of valuing the social/cultural dissimilarities and acknowledging and respecting the existence of all diverse groups in the computer-generated classroom contributed to less stress as well as higher levels of well-being and academic performances of students of color in an online learning environment (Yeboah & Smith, 2016).

Similar to Baig et al., (2014), Baker and Moore (2015); Brady et al. (2016); Clark, Mercer, Zeigler-Hill, and Defrene (2012); El-Ghoroury et al. (2012); Yeboah and Smith (2016); and Lewis, Cogburn, and Williams (2015) discussed and examined the

discriminatory factors that contributed to stress and attributed to ethnic minority students from attaining their educational goals. The authors provided information as to what strategies students considered to be most helpful in combating stress/stressors. The researchers also provided information regarding obstacles students found to be most problematic in terms of preventing them from engaging in wellness techniques and/or activities. The results suggested that ethnic/racial minority students reported discrimination as a stressor more so than ethnic majority students. The results also revealed that strategies, such as affirmation intervention, benefitted minority ethnic students who experienced identity threat in school and that ethnic minority students felt more at ease in their environment when they felt certain that their higher educational programs were devoted to multicultural sensitivity and diversity. When discriminatory acts are recognized to surpass ethnic minority graduate students' resources, the occurred stress could endanger their well-being (Odafe, Salami, & Walker, 2017). As a result, the need for self-care practices should be encouraged by the faculty and administration of higher education institutions (El-Ghoroury et al.; Pakenham, 2015; Rummell, 2015).

Stress and the need for self-care practices are important for graduate students (Bamonti et al., 2014; Goncher, Sherman, Haskins, & Barnett, 2013; Myers et al., 2012). Self-care practices are methods that African American doctoral students can adopt to manage stressors attributed by discrimination more effectively (Bamonti et al.). Effective self-care practices include sleep, exercise, social support, emotion regulation strategies, and mindfulness practice (Myers et al.) and help prevent stress, strain, and fatigue that may have negative effects on their personal and professional lives (Goncher et al.).

The authors emphasized the need for higher education institutions to encourage self-care practices for students in the field of psychology (Belmonti et al.; Goncher et al.; Myers et al.). Similar to Myers et al, Rummel (2015) provided information about how students coped with stressors in regard to workload, stress, and mental and physical health and satisfaction regarding their program of study. Students reported that thesis, dissertation, and/or other research were the most stressful aspect of graduate school (Rummel). Students also reported experiencing fatigue as well as head and back aches biweekly or more (Rummel). Additional results indicated that some students in clinical and counseling psychology programs experienced higher rates of somatic and psychological symptoms than what was observed in the general population (Rummel).

In addition to the promotion of self-care in higher education programs, social support is also essential because it shows concern not only for the academic success of African American doctoral students but for their personal and professional development as well. Social support is an important factor for African American students attending predominantly White campuses. Fernandez-Gonzalez, Gonzalez-Hernandez, and Trianes-Toress (2015) and Grier-Reed and Wilson (2016) examined elements of optimism, self-esteem, and social support, in terms of how they predicted academic success and discussed the importance for African American students having their needs met both socially and psychologically while attending school. The authors discovered that Black students who discussed with others about being discriminated against tended to have higher grade point averages than students who did not seek to have social support. Social support plays an important role in buffering the effects of stress related to discrimination

(Odafe et al., 2017) as well as assisting African American students in achieving their academic goals (Bently-Edwards et al., 2018; Brunsma et al., 2017; Shahid, Nelson, & Cardemil, 2017; Zeligman et al., 2015).

Stress, loneliness, and levels of burnout contribute to poor academic performance (Stoliker & Lafreniere, 2015; Talib & Zia-ur-Rehman, 2012). Stoliker and Lafreniere found that exhaustion, professional efficacy, and loneliness were predictors of perceived stress. In addition, they reported that cynicism, professional efficacy, and perceived stress were also significant predictors of students' academic performance. Talib and Aia-ur-Rehman found that course load and time management were the main sources of the students' stress that affected their grade point average, followed by lack of sleep/too much sleep, and personal relationships being close contenders.

The researchers cited in the previous paragraphs provided information from studies conducted on both online and brick and mortar educational institutions. Though evidence was found to support discrimination at both online and brick and mortar educational institutions, research regarding issues related to discrimination in an online educational format remains limited. The literature I cited consisted of information and viewpoints provided by psychology graduate students who completed their programs while attending brick and mortar institutions and contained little, if any, information targeting online African American doctoral students, which is the population of this study. This deficiency of information regarding the online experiences of issues related to discrimination among African American students is what assisted me in the process of developing the problem statement, which is described in the following section. The

findings of this study filled this gap by increasing the understanding of the online experiences of stress related to discrimination and how stress relates to the feelings, behaviors, and attitudes of African American students as they worked through stressors while achieving their academic goals.

## Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this study was stress that is related to discrimination experienced by African American students in online doctoral programs. Stress resulting from discrimination and prejudice can become problematic because it can materialize in ways that affect the academics, educational experiences, and overall health of racially underrepresented students (Lewis et al., 2015; Schwartz, 2012). More than 70% of doctoral students reported that their peak performance was compromised by one or more stressors (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Research studies have been conducted nationally with African American doctoral students that specified significant levels of stress related to discrimination among this population group (Baker & Moore, 2015; Brunsma et al. 2017; Felder et al., 2014; Jaeger & Haley, 2016; Williams et al, 2016). These studies indicated that African American students encountered racism, discrimination, and daily microaggressions within their department of study. Past studies also indicated that ethnic racial minority students reported discrimination as a stressor more so than ethnic racial majority students (El-Ghoroury et al.; Hunn, 2014). Additionally, African American students frequently experienced more academic stress and received less social support than White students, which often leads to feelings of being unwanted and not belonging,

negatively impacting academic performance and retention (Clark et al., 2014; El-Ghoroury et al.; Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016; Hunn).

African American students encounter similar stressors as White students within the online educational format (e.g., school assignments, research activities, and monetary restrictions); however, they also encounter stressors that are distinctive to their race, such as discrimination, racism, stereotyping, prejudice, isolation, disconnection from peers and faculty, and diverse cultural expectations (Baker & Moore, 2015; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2014; Myers et al., 2012; Tynes et al., 2013). Yeboah and Smith (2016) conducted a study regarding the online learning experiences and educational performances of ethnic minority students, finding that negative stereotyping encountered by ethnic minority students impacted their educational performances. Additionally, students reported matters pertaining to differences in culture, such as inadequate communication; negative perception; and failure to understand or interpret teachers and colleagues correctly during online discussions; that negatively impacted their educational performance (Yeboah & Smith). In a study regarding demographic diversity in online knowledge sharing, Baig et al. (2014) reported that conflict can arise when individuals from diverse cultures interpret information that is influenced by their personal opinions and biases.

Numerous studies have focused on stress related to racism and discrimination among African American students who attend traditional educational institutions across the United States (Baker & Moore, 2015; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2014; Myers et al., 2012; Tynes et al., 2013). Although research regarding the experiences of

discrimination among African American doctoral students attending traditional educational institutions is bountiful (Baker & Moore; Beamon, 2014; Bentley-Edwards, et al., 2018; Brunsma et al., 2017; El-Ghoroury et al.; Felder et al., 2014; Jaeger & Haley, 2016; Jones et al. 2018; Myers et al.; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016; Williams et al., 2016; Zeligman et al., 2015), research regarding the experiences of stress related to discrimination and how it impacts African American doctoral students in online education is scarce. Therefore, more research is needed to further understand African American students' experiences of stress related to discrimination while attending doctoral programs online. The results from this study will provide researchers with important data that may have been overlooked in previous studies and may be distinctive to this population caused by factors associated with their race and culture (see Grady, La Touche, Oslawski-Lopez, Powers, & Simacek, 2014; Rummell, 2015).

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of stress related to discrimination among African American students who are participating in online doctoral programs. In addition, I explored the discriminatory factors African American doctoral students perceived as stressors toward earning their degree. Also, I explored the strategies utilized to help them overcome and cope with stressors related to discrimination in online education.

## Research Questions

I developed the following research questions to explore the experiences of stress related to discrimination among African American students who are participating in

online doctoral programs:

RQ1: How do African American doctoral students describe their experiences of stress related to discrimination in an online program?

RQ2: What discriminatory factors do African American students perceive as stressors toward earning their doctoral degree?

RQ3: What strategies do African American students use to assist in coping with stressors related to discrimination in online education?

## Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal theory. Cognitive appraisal theory postulates that when individuals are provided with adequate resources, they will encounter fewer negative results from the stressor in relation to individuals considered less capable of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to Lazarus and Folkman, cognitive appraisal includes two stages: primary and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal emerges when an individual is confronted with a stressor and determines whether the stressor is negative (i.e., stressful/demanding), positive (i.e., a challenge), and/or irrelevant (Lazarus & Folkman). Secondary appraisal emerges upon determining whether an individual is capable of coping with stressors given the resources attainable to them (Lazarus & Folkman).

Throughout the years, Lazarus, along with colleagues, continued to develop the theory utilizing college students and members of the community to determine how individuals interpret and respond to certain stressors (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, 1984). The theory has evolved with researchers, such as Wondra and Ellsworth (2015),

conducting a study proposing an appraisal theory of vicarious emotional experiences, that included empathy, founded on appraisal theories of emotion. Their theory suggests the feelings that individuals have toward others are formed by the way they assess their circumstances; just as direct feelings are formed by the way they assess their own circumstances (Wondra & Ellsworth). An important aspect to consider when evaluating the emotional experiences of stress is that each individual may experience stress differently; therefore, how each individual appraises the situation may differ as well (Wondra & Ellsworth). This framework was appropriate for this study because it provided African American students with the sufficient resources to assist with perceiving how they appraised stress and responded to stressors.

## Nature of the Study

This generic qualitative study was exploratory in nature, and I explored how African American students in online doctoral programs interpreted their experiences of stress regarding discrimination. Generic qualitative research was appropriate for this study because the approach assisted in obtaining a more in-depth understanding of the issues related to discrimination that were endured among this population (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell argued that a generic qualitative study is utilized when researchers are interested in understanding the meaning behind the phenomenon that has taken place. It is also utilized when researchers show interest in knowing how individuals interpret their experiences, how individuals formulate and create their worlds, and the connotations they associate to their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell). A quantitative research design was not appropriate for this study because there were no

variables to be isolated, manipulated, and controlled (see Patton, 2015). Additionally, hypothesis testing did not occur, and the data collected were not calculated numerically (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). For this study, I recruited participants via Walden University's participant pool and social media. Data were collected by conducting interviews with participants, and their responses were coded by me as themes were identified.

## Definitions

The following is a list of definitions used in this study:

*Culture*: The set of values, morals, beliefs, and customs that impacts the behavioral conducts of a social group and as it relates to a society's typical way of observing and communicating with the social environment (King & McInerney, 2014).

*Discrimination*: Unfair or unjust treatment of diverse individuals centered on characteristics, such as gender, race, age, or sexual orientation (Shankar & Hinds, 2017).

*Online education*: A computer-based network and multimedia technology in which the Internet is used for teaching and learning. Communication and discussion among instructors and students occur both synchronously and asynchronously (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Zhao, Yang, & Ma, 2017).

*Racial discrimination:* The exclusion of individuals on the foundation of race. A way to enable dominant groups to preserve racial hierarchies and privilege (Feagin & Bennefield, 2014).

*Stress*: The relationship or transaction between individuals and their environment (Lazarus, 1991).

*Stressor:* An actual or perceived difference between environmental requests and the resources of the individual to adjust to these requirements (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

*Traditional educational institution*: Brick and mortar schools where students travel to school and from schools and classes are conducted in a physical classroom setting (Van Doorn & Van Doorn, 2014).

## Assumptions

A generic qualitative study can assist in acquiring a greater in-depth understanding of the experiences encountered by individuals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, it can also provide information as to how individuals interpret their experiences as well as the meanings they associate to these experiences (Merriam & Tisdell).  In this study, I assumed that all participants would provide truthful answers regarding their experiences from both brick and mortar and online institutions because their responses would provide a clear picture of the discrimination experiences they had in the two different types of educational institutions. I also assumed that the discrimination experiences that participants had at a brick and mortar institution might be different from those at an online educational institution. This was assumed because the research shows that African American students have higher levels of academic success at a traditional educational institution versus an online educational institution (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Arroyo, Palmer, & Maramba, 2015; United States Department of Education, 2015).

## Scope and Delimitations

In this study, I employed a generic qualitative design to explore the experiences of stress related to discrimination among African American doctoral students. This generic qualitative design assisted in obtaining a more in-depth understanding of the issues related to discrimination that are endured among this population. The scope of this study was limited to African American doctoral students that were enrolled exclusively in classes online at an accredited university. Students were selected from various programs of study and were selected from a single university and without contemplation for other universities. Prior to classes taken online, the students selected might have achieved former levels of schooling through brick and mortar educational institutions. The results gathered from this study are not planned for usage with populations beyond the scope chosen, though when feasible, may contribute support for later research studies.

**Limitations**

Qualitative research enables an individual to examine a specific phenomenon with more depth; however, this does not exclude it from limitations. Because I was not able to meet with participants physically, I conducted interview sessions through the use of computer technology, such as Skype. I selected participants from one university and examined a specific population from that university. Using a single group resulted in similar findings as opposed to findings stemming from diverse individuals. Moreover, conducting interviews with students from a single university only makes it difficult to generalize findings across universities.

**Significance**

African American students may be confronted with additional and distinctive stressors while attending traditional brick and mortar universities; however, information regarding the similarities and/or differences of stressors experienced while attending online universities is limited. In this generic qualitative research study, I addressed this gap by contributing a more in-depth understanding of the online experiences of African American doctoral students as they relate to the stress from discrimination that these students encountered in doctoral programs. The results of this study demonstrated the importance of understanding the perceptions and responses of African American students regarding the stress related to discrimination they faced and also demonstrated the importance of stress management to assist in fostering resiliency in both educational and professional environments. Stress management and resilience are also an important aspect of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal theory, which suggests when individuals are properly equipped to manage stress; they are more likely to progress positively through life's demands.

The results of this study add to the existing research by bringing to the forefront issues pertaining to ethnicity/culture and how they influenced the lives of African American students in regard to stress that is related to discrimination as well as how they responded to stressors while participating in a doctoral program online. Social change was enhanced by bringing this issue into public awareness through informing the faculty and administration in educational institutions of the importance of understanding the perspectives, not only of African American students, but all students from diverse cultures and backgrounds. Additionally, gaining a greater depth of knowledge regarding

the experiences of stress related to discrimination among African American students led

to an increased understanding of how to retain African American students in doctoral

programs until they graduate. Moreover, learning about stress related to the

discrimination of African American students assists in helping to diversify the doctoral

field of study. Discovering ways to achieve diversity helps to enlarge and reflect the

diversity in the United States. Lastly, social change could be enhanced by decreasing

stress related to discrimination among African American students in an online doctoral

program, which may promote wellness and reduce overall stress for this population.

**Summary**

There is an apparent gap in the literature regarding stress that is related to

discrimination among African American students enrolled in online doctoral programs.

By using interviews to gather data for this study, I was able to demonstrate the

importance of understanding the participants' perceptions and responses regarding the

stress they encountered related to discrimination while enrolled in classes online. The

findings of this study demonstrate the importance of addressing stress that African

American students experienced while participating in an online doctoral program and

how stress management assists African American doctoral students in fostering resiliency

in both educational and professional environments.

In Chapter 1, I provided the introduction and background to the study. Chapter 1

also included the purpose, the problem statement, the significance, the conceptual

framework, the research questions, the assumptions, the scope and delimitations, and the

limitations of my study. In Chapter 2, I explore the literature regarding stress that is

related to discrimination from participants enrolled in an online doctoral program. I also

describe the strategies used to search my literature for this study. The conceptual

framework is described in detail and coping strategies utilized to manage stress/stressors

are discussed. A thorough review of the literature recognizing the gaps and identifying

the key concepts are presented. Chapter 2 concludes with a summary.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

**Introduction**

The problem addressed in this study was stress related to the discrimination experienced by African American students in online doctoral programs. In this study, I examined the differences regarding the discrimination experiences encountered at both traditional and online education institutions. Additionally, I examined the discriminatory factors that African American students perceived as barriers toward earning their doctoral degree and coping strategies utilized to combat discriminatory issues within the online education format.

Respectively, in this chapter, I provide information about the group selected for this study by way of literature and research. In this literature review, I examine research regarding stress resulting from discrimination encountered among African American students at the collegial level and, more specifically, in an online learning environment. Information about African American students in an online learning environment is provided along with a justification of the necessity for this study. Topics discussed in this review include stress, discrimination, and strategies for coping.

Numerous studies exist that center on the stressors of racism and discrimination affecting African American students attending traditional educational institutions across the United States. Along with the common stressors that many college students' experience (e.g., academics, finances, research activities), African American students also encounter stressors related to race, such as racial discrimination, prejudice, stereotyping, racial microaggressions, and isolation (Baker & Moore, 2015; Beamon,

2014; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Henfield, Woo, & Washington, 2013; Johnson et al., 2014; Myers et al., 2012; Shahid et al., 2017; Tynes et al., 2013; Willis, 2016). These stressors have invariably been related with poor academic performance, psychological well-being, and social adjustment (Beamon). For example, in a study of 135 African American college students, it was reported that 98.5% of those students had experienced racism at their college campus (Shahid et al.). African American students view the campus climate as being more negative and hostile than their White counterparts (Beamon; Lo, McCallum, Huges, Smith, & McKnight, 2017). Additionally, African American students feel the campus climate did not include their cultural experiences and, as a consequence, left them feeling isolated and alienated with a decreased sense of belonging and dedication to the educational institution (Johnson et al.; Robinson, Equibel, & Rich, 2013).

A large number of African American students have reported experiences where they received less respect than their White peers (Baker & Moore, 2015; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2014). Because of the undesirable stereotypes targeted toward them, African American students also reported feelings of always needing to be obligated to represent themselves and their entire race in a positive manner (Baber, 2012; Griffin, Cunningham, & Mwangi, 2016; Massey & Owens, 2014). McGhee (2016) reported that for some African American students, a single discriminatory act was all it took for them to initiate strategies to overcome stereotypes. However, some students still remained discouraged despite having outstanding grades and recognition of achievement or accomplishments (McGhee).

While prior research documenting the experiences of stress related to discrimination that African American students encounter at traditional educational institutions is abundant, research is scarce regarding the experiences of stress related to discrimination among African American students who attend classes online. In my search for literature, I found few articles related to the discrimination experiences of African American students within the online educational format (Conaway & Bethune, 2015; Zembylas, 2008). Therefore, additional research was needed to understand African American students' experiences of stress related to discrimination while attending doctoral programs online. The literature reviewed in the subsequent sections of this chapter guided my work in this study to achieve a greater understanding of the previous research regarding the diverse topics relevant to this study.

**Literature Search Strategy**

I collected the literature for this review using online resources accessed through Google Scholar and the Walden University Library. Through Walden University Library, searches were completed using the following databases to obtain articles related to the topic of stress related to discrimination among African American students in online doctoral programs: Dissertations & Thesis, EDUCATION Source, ERIC, MEDLINE with Full Text, PROQuest Central, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, SAGE Journals, and Thoreau Multi-Database Search. Pertinent keywords included: *stress, stressors, discrimination, racial-discrimination, bias, prejudice, stereotyping, racial micro aggression, doctoral students, African American students, higher education, online education, and coping.*

Despite the numerous studies that have been completed regarding the stressors of discrimination among African American students particularly on college campuses in the United States, there were few findings regarding teacher bias and the stereotyping of ethnic minority students in the online educational format. Topics covered in this review are stress, self-care, stress among college students, stress among African American college students, discrimination, discrimination at traditional education institutions, discrimination in online education institutions, diversity in online education, coping, differences in coping among genders, and coping strategies African American students utilized to assist in coping with stress/stressors related to discrimination.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research study was Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal theory. Cognitive appraisal theory describes the procedures associated with stress and coping as well as justifies the discrepancy among stressors or demands and mental/emotional resources that generates psychological distress (Edge & Ivey, 2012). Cognitive appraisal theory focuses attention on the interaction between the internal elements of an individual and external stimulus (Lazarus & Folkman). Stress arises from external occurrences that stem from the environment (Lazarus & Folkman). An external occurrence gives rise to physiological responses of the body that surpasses an individual's ability to manage stress (Lazarus & Folkman).

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model describes two processes: cognitive appraisal and coping. Within their model, Lazarus and Folkman described cognitive appraisal as an assessment process that includes individuals ascertaining whether they have something to

lose in the encounter with a stressful event, and if they do, to what degree the encounter

surpasses their actions or strategies to cope (Francis, 2018; Hoggard, Byrd, & Sellers,

2012). During the appraisal stage, individuals evaluate whether they have something at

risk, and whether they can control or manage the event; consequently, events are not

inherently stressful (Hoggard et al.). The appraisal regulates whether an individual

experience these events as stressful (Bliese, Edwards, & Sonnentage, 2017; Hoggard et

al.). The cognitive appraisal model defines coping as a means of controlling certain

demands of an appraised stressful occurrence (Folkman, 1992).

Individuals may assess negative occurrences in a number of ways depending on

how they view circumstantial pressures of the stressors in relation to the coping resources

available to them. The negative life occurrence may be discerned as a threat (i.e.,

perceiving the occurrences as threatening to life), an ill effect or danger (i.e., perceiving

occurrences as a physical damage to life), or a challenge (i.e., perceiving the occurrences

as an opportunity for advancement, (Yeung, Qian Lu, Wong, & Huynh, 2015). The

appraisal process in conjunction with personal and circumstantial attributes then

determines which coping strategies are utilized (Hoggard et al., 2012).

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), cognitive appraisal includes two

stages: primary and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal emerges when an individual is

confronted with a stressor and determines whether the stressor is negative (i.e.,

stressful/demanding), positive (i.e., a challenge), and/or irrelevant (Lazarus & Folkman).

The individual assesses the effects of demands and resources on their functioning; if

circumstantial pressures and/or demands exceed accessible resources, the individual may

assess the circumstance as being a potential threat or harm, that genuine harm has taken place, or there is potential benefit (Lazarus, 1999). In other words, when individuals are convinced that they are capable of managing or coping with certain situations, it is probable they will perceive it as a challenge. In contrast, when individuals are convinced that they are incapable of managing or coping with situations, it is probable they will perceive it as a threat.

Secondary appraisal emerges upon determining whether individuals are capable of coping with stressors given the resources attainable to them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The focus is centered on modifying the harm, loss, threat or challenge (Lazarus & Folkman). The individual's reaction to coping is influenced by their recognition of ability to take charge over the stressful circumstance (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985).

Previous researchers have suggested theoretical models utilizing a stress and coping framework for understanding individuals' experiences of stress that is related with all types of discrimination (Doyle & Molix, 2014; Hoggard et al., 2012). There is an increasing amount of empirical evidence revealing that the damaging effects of discrimination on an individual's psychological health may be mitigated by effective coping strategies (Hoggard et al.; McGee, 2016; Polanco-Roman, Danies, & Anglin, 2016; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). In addition, Hoggard et al. stated that researchers have utilized and altered expansive models of stress and coping to their investigation of racial discrimination as a stressor. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) introduced the most powerful model of stress and coping in the discipline. Within their transactional model of stress and coping, personal and external

factors act together to determine how individuals appraise and cope with stressors and/or stressful events. Personal factors pertain to dispositional characteristics (e.g., personality traits, temperament, and genetics) that ensue in the inter individual difference in the way individuals appraise and cope with events that are comparable (Lazarus & Folkman). External factors pertain to characteristics of the situation (e.g., newness, chronicity, and duration of condition or situation) that affect how individuals respond to the events (Lazarus & Folkman).

Beginning in the 1960s, there has been an increasing acknowledgement that although stress is an unavoidable feature of the human condition, coping is what makes a huge difference in the adaptational outcome (Lazarus & Folkman, 1985). In *Psychological Stress and the Coping Process*, Lazarus (1966) reported that the emphasis started to move moderately from stress intrinsically to coping. World War II and the Korean War led to research regarding the individual dissimilarities on the outcomes of stress on performance (Lazarus). It became evident, however, that there were significant dissimilarities in how individuals responded to and appraised stress (Lazarus, 1999). Throughout the course of this time, Lazarus (1999) expanded upon the stress and coping model introduced in 1985 to include emotion as part of the repertoire. Lazarus stated that stress and emotion are dependent upon one another. In an initial written study on stress and coping, Lazarus (1966) analyzed research and devised a theory pertaining to mental and emotional stress, which was founded on the construct of appraisal. During this period, Lazarus began to perceive stress as a component of a greater collection of affairs

that contained the emotions so commenced to alter the construct of appraisal to suit the emotions.

Findings on the impact of stress on student achievement vary across studies. Delahaij and Van Dam (2017); Romero, Riggs, and Ruggero (2015); and Weinber, Gil, and Gilbar (2013) conducted research studies to examine the differences in coping strategies and coping styles among military veterans, student veterans, and victims of terror attacks who were exposed to acute and/or chronic stressful events. Bentley-Edwards and Chapman-Hilliard (2015) and Bentley-Edwards, Agonafer, Edmondson, and Flannigan (2016) utilized the stress and coping model as a guide to explore the factors of racial cohesion, racial dissonance, and race-related stress to determine how these variables impact resilience and academic/goal efficacy among African American college students attending historically Black colleges/universities or predominately White institutions (PWIs).

Delahaij and Van Dam's (2017) goal was to examine if appraisal emotions would arbitrate the relation between coping self-efficacy and coping responses to acute stress. Results indicated that coping style straightforwardly influenced coping behavior with individuals exhibiting an emotion-focused coping style (EFC) used more EFC behaviors, and individuals exhibiting a task-focused coping style (TFC) used more TFC behaviors during a demanding exercise activity. The results also indicated that in circumstances of acute stress, individuals who exhibited healthy coping self-efficacy experienced emotions that were considered a challenge rather than a threat. In contrast, the results indicated individuals who exhibited limited assurance in their capability to cope with stressful

events experienced more threat emotions and less challenge emotions, leading to ineffective coping behaviors.

Similar to the EFC and TFC coping styles utilized in Delahaij and Van Dam's (2017) study, Weinber et al.'s (2013) examined trait forgiveness (e.g., propensity of forgiveness) and coping strategies such as problem focused (PF), emotion focused, and avoidance among victims of terror attacks. Findings revealed that the propensity to forgive is positively related with PF coping and negatively related with avoidance coping. Findings also revealed that the propensity to forgive and PF coping are related with minimized severity in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, whereas emotion focused coping is related with increased PTSD symptom severity. The results support the theoretical notion that coping with stressful events is dependent upon both circumstantial demands and personality traits. Romero et al. (2015) aimed to investigate connections among coping styles and psychological symptoms among college student veterans. Similar to the findings in Weinberg's et al. (2015) study in which a negative relation among the propensity to forgive was positively associated with avoidance and PTSD, Romero et al. found that avoidant coping was also positively related with symptoms of PTSD.

Bentley-Edwards and Chapman-Hilliard (2015) found that students attending historically Black colleges/universities reported higher rates of racial cohesion than students attending PWIs, while Bentley-Edwards et al., (2016) found racial cohesion positively associated to goal efficacy and racial dissonance was significantly and inversely associated to goal efficacy. The authors reported when African American

students receive support from their college institution regarding topics they face in their community, this may assist in making their goals feel achievable, which in turn may foster resilience. Bentley-Edwards and Chapman-Hilliard reported no significant difference in dissonance, whereas, Bentley-Edwards et al., found that racial dissonance has a slight significant association with goal efficacy. In regard to stress associated with race, students attending PWIs reported significantly greater occurrences of discriminatory stress worldwide, individually, and in their college institution (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard,). The study demonstrated a positive relation among race related stress and racial cohesion. Bentley-Edwards' et al., study showed that stress associated with race was not significantly associated to goal efficacy, but only associated to students' goals.

Using Lazarus and Folkman's cognitive appraisal theory was relevant for this study as it helped to understand not only how African American students respond to stress related to discrimination, but also how stress affects their motivation, academic achievement, physical and psychological well-being. Additionally, it provides African American students strategies to protect themselves from stressors by providing affective, behavioral, and cognitive coping responses to promote resilience, encourage retention, and improve academic performance. The conceptual framework has been provided for this study; however, it was equally important to provide the appropriate methodology that would help gather the abundant information regarding the population selected for the study.

**A Generic Qualitative Study**

In qualitative research, information is gathered by utilizing open-ended questions through which contextually well-balanced meanings are examined in depth (Jackson, 2015). Braun and Clarke (2013) clarified the distinct characteristics between qualitative and quantitative research. The authors proposed that in a qualitative study words are used as data, and are gathered and evaluated in different ways, whereas, in a quantitative study numbers are used as data and are evaluated in a statistical format.

Qualitative research was selected for this study because I wanted to understand how the participants of this study develop meaning through their experiences. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that the general motives of qualitative research focuses on process and quality rather than quantity, with an objective to understand, describe, discover, and develop meaning, all from the participants' perspectives. Samples used in a qualitative study are usually purposeful, nonrandom (but not all the time), and small (Merriam & Tisdell). Also, findings generated from a qualitative study are extensive and richly descriptive in nature (Landrum & Garza, 2015).

Qualitative research suggests a variety of methods that can be described as non-quantitative (Madill, 2015). In other words, qualitative research findings are not generated through numerical data and do not utilize statistical operations or other forms of quantifying data; rather, findings are generated through the interpretations of the meaning of the data that is collected. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that to supply information that is comprehensible to other individuals, qualitative researchers introduce it in a fashion that allows them to feel it.

Maxwell (2013) described five key components that a research design should possess:

1. *Goal.* Why is the research study worth executing?

2. *Conceptual framework.* What is happening with the individuals you plan to study?

3. *Research questions.* What precisely, do you want to understand about the environment or participants being studied?

4. *Methods.* What actions will you perform in conducting the study?

5. *Validity.* How would the results or outcomes of the study be incorrect? Why should the results be accepted as true?

A generic qualitative research design employs methods (e.g., triangulation, member checks, and adequate engagement in data collection) for achieving genuineness and trustworthiness of the data gathered (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). A researcher conducting a generic qualitative study is interested in understanding the meaning of an event that has occurred in the lives of others. Within a generic qualitative research design, the researcher is provided with information regarding how individuals interpret their experiences, how they formulate and create their worlds, and the connotations they associate to their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell). The main objective is to understand how individuals give meaning to the experiences of a phenomenon that has taken place in their lives. Up to this point, I have furnished literature supporting the framework and methodology selected for the study. The first topic important to discuss in regard to the literature, was stress.

**Stress**

Stress can be defined as a state of being or emotion experienced when an individual recognizes that the demands placed on him/her are greater than the resources he or she has available (Lazarus, 1999). Frydenberg (2014) defined stress as a condition in which the individual views an external situation as threatening, and as a result; reaches an elevated state of arousal. Stress can be both positive and negative (Chiang, Turiano, Mroczek, & Miller, 2018), acute or chronic in nature (Piefke & Glienke, 2017), manageable or unmanageable (Contrada & Baum, 2012).

Stress has multiple dimensions. Mentally, stress makes individuals more susceptible to mental health illnesses such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Rosiek, Rosiek-Kryszewska, Leksowski, & Leksowski, 2016). Physically, stress jeopardizes an individual's ability to maintain balance or equilibrium, a condition known as homeostasis (Bliese et al., 2017). Emotionally, stress negatively impacts how individuals feel about themselves in regard to self-esteem and confidence (Holinka, 2015). Intellectually, stress impacts the perception, and problem solving ability of an individual (Hartley, Papp, Blumenstock, Floyd, & Goetz, 2017; McKlveen, Myers, & Herman, 2015). Socially, stress transforms the interactive relations between individuals (Milek, Butler, & Bodenman, 2015; Reed, O'Connor, Pace, Raison & Butler, 2017).

Stress comes in various forms which can be favorable and harmful (Branson, Turnbull, Dry, & Palmer, 2018; Frydenberg, 2014). According to Frydenberg, good stress occurs whenever a stressor acts as a motivator to help in achieving assignments. Crum, Salovey and Achor (2013) also suggested that individuals can efficiently use stress as a

motivator for aggressive problem solving by expecting and preparing for all possible circumstantial results. Kadziolka and Miller (2017) stated that stress is often regarded in its adverse form, when it upsets and limits the effectiveness to produce and achieve something. Even though both forms eventually deplete energy resources, it is the negative sources of stress that are considered unbeneficial for the individual (see Kadziolka & Miller).

Early research on stress can be traced to Walter B. Cannon (1915), an American physiologist who created the term "fight or flight" to explain the reaction of an organism to an external threat. Cannon stated that the reaction to threat depicts a departure from homeostasis, which he described as the stability of the internal environment controlled by different channels in response to renewing equilibrium once a disturbance has occurred (Contrada & Baum, 2012; Persson & Zakrisson, 2015). Cannon initially used the term stress to refer to the body's reaction to external situations (Contrada & Baum). The fight or flight response is activated by the autonomic nervous system whenever challenges become threatening, unmanageable, and uncertain (Gordon et al., 2017). The response is caused by the release of stress hormones that compel the body either to withstand and challenge the threat (fight) or flee and escape it (flight; Hoppenbrouwers, Bulten, & Brazil, 2016).

An ensuing milestone is the work of Hans Selye (1936). Selye proposed four fundamental versions of stress: good stress (eustress), bad stress (distress), overstress (hyperstress), and understress (hypostress). Selye stated that the main objective of behavior is to attain equilibrium between the opposing effects of stress discovering as

much eustress possible (Selye, 1979). Selye also formulated the general adaptation

syndrome (GAS), to describe the "non-specific response of the body to any demand"

(Collier, Renquist, & Xiao, 2017, p. 10367). GAS describes the organism's reaction to

both acute and chronic stress (Selye, 1976). According to Selye, the GAS is composed of

three stages of the body's response to challenging stimuli – the alarm stage, resistance,

and exhaustion. During the alarm and resistance stages, the body tries to adapt to the

stressors placed upon it. In the exhaustion stage, the body fails to adapt to the chronic

stressors, thus signifying depletion of adaptive strength and vitality causing the body to

become exhausted and prone to psychological illnesses such as mood and mental

disorders.

The brain and body work together to maintain allostasis when under stress.

Allostasis is referred to as the power to achieve stability within a changeable surrounding

through physiological or behavioral change (McEwin, 2012). Stress causes over-

activation of the autonomic nervous system and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical

axis that is intended to attain homeostasis (Berger & Sarnyai, 2015). It is probable that

this over activation from chronic stress is responsible for the wear and tear on the body

known as allostatic load, which can be detrimental to the body's overall well-being

(Berger & Sarnyai). According to Brooks et al. (2014), the body responds by adapting

both mentally and physically to the stress in order to prevent damaging effects from

occurring.

An increase in allostatic load causes the adaptive coping abilities to decrease

(Andreotti, Root, Ahles, McEwen, & Compas, 2015). A decrease in adaptive coping

ability causes maladaptive behaviors to be utilized, resulting in physiological and

neurocognitive alterations in the structure and functioning of the brain, thus making one

susceptible to sickness and disease (Andreotti et al.). Therefore, it is essential for all

individuals, including college students, to practice self-care in order to manage stress

effectively.

**Stress and Self-Care**

The need for self-care practices are important for college students; even more so

for graduate level students (Bomonti et al., 2014). Effective self-care practices include

sleep, exercise, social support, emotion regulation strategies, and mindfulness practice

(Colman, et al., 2016; Goncher et al., 2013). Self-care practice eliminates stress, strain,

and fatigue; all of which can negatively impact students' personal and professional lives

(Colman, et. al.; Goncher et al.; Pakenham, 2015). Bomonti et al., Goncher et al., and

Myers et al., (2012) conducted research studies examining the self-care practices of

psychology graduate students. Myers et al. suggested that self-care practices are

associated with perceived levels of stress among psychology graduate students. For

instance, graduate students who reported low household incomes compared to their living

expenses reported higher levels of stress. According to El-Ghoroury et al (2012), the high

cost of tuition for graduate studies is one of the greatest barriers to self-care for those

students who struggle to make ends meet. In addition, married students reported

significantly less stress than unmarried students, (it is suggested that marriage can be a

powerful source of spousal support Myers et al.). Lastly, younger students reported more

perceived stress than older students, which is consistent with findings in Bomonti's et al.

study, which suggested that younger age is related to higher levels of fatigue. The authors

from the preceding studies emphasized the need for education institutions to encourage

self-care practices that would successfully produce desirable outcomes of stress

management and professional functioning for this population.

The most prominent areas in which students desired to see modifications in their

psychology graduate programs pertained to the promotion of self-care and heightened

levels of perceived support from faculty (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Pakenham, 2015;

Rummell, 2015). Students reported levels of discontentment with the value given to self-

care by the faculty in the psychology graduate program (Rummell). Students who

received less social support reported more stressful incidents and sustained more

emotional, psychological, and physiological health issues (El-Ghoroury et al). Myers et

al. (2012) suggested that students desired for more representation of suitable self-care by

members of faculty. In addition, students desired more education in regard to self-care

strategies, and more empathy from faculty with regard to the plight of equalizing a

personal life in addition to being a graduate student (Rummell).  Research has shown that

interactions with faculty increased students' ability to manage stress. These findings are

in line with findings from current research which suggests that regular and reliable

support from faculty may assist students in managing stress more effectively (Bomonti et

al., 2014; Carter, & Barnett, 2014; Myers et al.; Pakenham; Santana& Fouad, 2017).

**Stress among College Students**

College is a significant time in every person's life. For some individuals' it can be

a time of great personal development; for others, it can be time of doubtfulness riddled

with stress and anxiety (Brunsma, Embrick, & Shin, 2017). Throughout the course of college, students experience greater degrees of independence, experience changes in their social, personal, and professional lives, and secure valuable life skills such as time management and problem solving (Stoliker & LaFreniere, 2015). However, these exciting new experiences also come with new challenging demands and sources of stress (Stoliker & LaFreniere).

College students encounter common stressors while adapting to the college lifestyle. These stressors include, but are not limited to, loneliness, academic workload, time-management, personal and professional responsibilities (Garriott & Nisle, 2017). Stoliker and LaFeniere (2015) and Talib and Zia-ur-Rehman (2012) discovered that stress, loneliness, and levels of burnout contribute to poor academic performance. Stoliker and Lafreniere's study examined 150 undergraduate psychology students' (25 males, 124 females, and 1identified as agender) attending a university in Southwestern Ontario, Canada. Stoliker and Lafreniere examined emotions regarding stress, loneliness, and levels of burnout to ascertain how these elements relate to students' academic performance. The University of California, Los Angeles Loneliness Scale-Version 3 was used to measure the degree of loneliness and isolation of students and the Academic Performance Survey was used to evaluate students' perception regarding academic performance. Their findings suggested that loneliness and burnout (27%) and social, academic, family, and personal issues/stressors (58%) had an adverse effect on students 'overall academic experience. Specifically, emotions regarding academic burnout and loneliness had a negative impact on students' perception of stress, academic participation,

and academic performance. However, this study found no significant gender differences regarding the outcomes of stress.

Another study conducted was an investigation on the perception of stress and the elements that generate stress that impact students' academic performance (Talib & Zia-ur-Rehman, 2012). The study consisted of 250 university students (123 males, and 74 females). The Perceived Stress Scale was used to measure stress and the stress factor survey was used to recognize elements of stress that students acknowledged over a given period of time. Results from the study indicated that course load (53%) and time management (36%) were main sources of stress for students that affected their academic participation and performance. In addition, lack of sleep (25%) or too much sleep (32%) and personal relationships (20%) were close contenders. Talib and Zia-ur-Rehman found that high student stress levels correlated with lower academic performance. However, this study found significant gender differences in perceived stress and academic performance. Results indicated that female participants performed better than the male participants and have better grade point averages.

The aforementioned research studies shed light on a few of the common causes of stress that affect student participation and academic performance. However, it was also important to shed light on the causes of stress that African American students encountered that influenced their engagement, academic performance, and persistence as well.

**Stress among African American College Students**

Stress is an unavoidable facet in the lives of college students. There are many variations to stress, and students are not exempt (Baghurst & Kelly, 2014; Hintz, Frazier, & Meredith, 2015). As students struggle with heightened education, personal and societal demands, conditions such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep deprivation, colds/flu and occasionally suicidal ideation heightens as well (Baghurst & Kelly; Rosiek et. al, 2016).

African American students encounter similar stressors as White students; however, they also encounter stressors that are distinctive to their ethnicity (Zeligman, Prescod, & Greene, 2015). For example, Jaeger and Haley (2016) conducted a qualitative study to examine the overt and covert barriers experienced by eleven ethnically diverse doctoral students in their deliberation of a profession in academia. The participants revealed that they have experienced being disregarded, disrespected, unvalued, and discriminated against while obtaining their college education. The participants stated that these experiences oftentimes discouraged them from furthering their education and/or obtaining a profession in academia (Jaeger & Haley).

In another qualitative study 38 high achieving African American and Hispanic science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) students were interviewed to investigate their experiences with institutional bias and other barriers that harm their ethnic identities, causing stress and long-lasting mental and emotional strain. The results indicated that the participants experienced racial bias and stereotyping from administration, faculty, colleagues, and instructors. Also, the participants reported having to always prove their capability in performing the STEM curriculum requirements

(McGee, 2016). For example, the participants stated that their first math instructors never chose them to provide solutions to hard and tough math problems assuming that they did not know the answers. Unlike the aforementioned study where the discriminatory experiences left the participants feeling discouraged and deterred, the experiences of bias and race related stress in this study did not discourage the participants from accomplishing the STEM courses (McGee). Rather, bias and other discriminatory stressors served as a perturbing catalyst for these participants to succeed in STEM classes (McGee). Nonetheless, bias did result in increased anxiety, heightened outbursts of anger, and obsessive work ethic in participants when having to prove their capability to succeed in STEM classes (McGee).

Research has suggested that African American students who attend PWIs frequently perceive the campus climate as being more negative than do White students (Baker & Moore, 2015; Johnson, et al., 2014; McGee, 2016; Means, 2016). A major concern for African American students is the lack of diversity in school administration and faculty (Baker & Moore; Williams et al., 2016). The lack of ethnical diversity in faculty restricts African American students and students from diverse ethnicities the opportunity to have members of faculty as mentors and role models that not only look like them, but also possess similarities in culture, situational circumstances, and experiences, which can adversely influence student achievement and perseverance (Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Smith, 2015).

Scarcity of ethnically diverse faculty in academia is prevalent (Jaeger & Haley, 2016). As stated by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2016), 7% of

college and university faculty are of African American descent, 1% are Asian, 1% are American Indian, 1% were of multiple ethnicities, and .05 were Pacific Islander. Across a five-year span reported by the NCES, percentages of African American faculty stayed the same and Latino and Asian faculty were raised by 1%. NCES report also reveals that only 25% of graduate apprentices were students of diverse ethnicities.

According to Conrad and Gasman (2015), when faculties are ethnically diverse; it creates atmospheres that are academically prolific for learning, and increases desirable learning outcomes such as cognitive, communal, and municipal growth for all students. Students who obtain experience in interacting and communicating with students of diverse ethnicities not only experience growth personally, but professionally evolve into useful employees in corporations that hold high regard for diversity that are innovators of change (Lopuch & Davis, 2014).

A plethora of research investigations exists examining ways in which stress related to discrimination influence academic performance, achievement, and persistence among African American students at PWIs (Baker & Moore, 2015; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Myers et al., 2012; Shahid et al., 2017; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016; Tynes et al., 2013); however, scant literature on the experiences of discrimination related stress among AA online doctoral students exists. The following sections discussed the literature that has been gathered in relation to discrimination and discrimination encountered in both brick and mortar and online educational institutions.

**Discrimination**

According to Shankar and Hinds (2017), discrimination refers to the unfair or unjust treatment of diverse individuals centered on characteristics such as gender, race, age, or sexual orientation. Discrimination involves treating individuals in a different, negative, or adverse manner without a reasonable justification (Gokce, 2013). For instance, placing an individual in an unfavorable position because of his or her race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, mental or physical impairment, age, or sexual orientation (Levy, Heissel, Richeson, & Adam, 2016; Shankar & Hinds). Although discrimination is unlawful, it does take place in our society. It occurs in advertisements, places of employment, housing, public places, and education (Gokce; Huynh, Hunk, & Stein, 2017).

Discrimination can manifest in various ways such as threating remarks, acts of intimidation, and verbal attacks and/or assaults. Discrimination can be both direct and indirect (Gokce, 2013). Individuals or groups of individuals who are treated less fairly from another because of age, sex, sexual orientation, disability, race, ethnicity or religious beliefs is an example of direct discrimination (Gokce; Paradies et al., 2015). Indirect discrimination on the other hand involves rules, policies, or procedures of an organization that pertains to everyone in the same manner but come as a disadvantage to some individuals than others (Gokce). For example, an employer has a policy stating that all employees must work Saturdays, this policy might not affect most employees, but employees of Jewish or Muslim faith would be at a disadvantage.

Characteristics of direct discrimination are stereotypes and prejudices (Gokce, 2013). Stereotypes are exaggerated generalizations about the qualities of a person formed

on his or her membership in a group (Fuller, 2018). Prejudice refers to unfair, negative outlooks toward and generalizations regarding members of an ethnic minority group (Lo et al., 2017). A characteristic of an indirect form of discrimination is microaggression. Microaggressions are short, subtle, spoken, behavioral and environmental injustices that commonly take place on a daily basis (Sue, 2010). Whether intentional or unintentional, acts of microaggression convey unfriendly, offensive, or negative ethnical, gender, sexual orientation, and religious insults or snubs to the targeted individual or group (Sue, 2010).

In education, individuals are exposed to direct or indirect discrimination. Individuals with disabilities have restricted means to education and occupational instruction in many parts of the world (Gokce, 2013). Other types of discrimination in education are age, gender, spirituality and religion, racial ethnicity, and sex (Minnesota Department of Human Rights, 2012). The following are examples of the types of discrimination students can be exposed to in education (Minnesota Department of Human Rights, 2012):

1. College not accepting applications from individuals who are 50 years of age.

2. An instructor treats individuals who do not speak English unfairly because she/he believes these students cannot learn and should not be in school in the first place.

3. An Asian student is discriminated against because of his/her ethnicity. The student informs his/her teachers and the principal of the bullying. The school does nothing and the bullying persists weekly.

4.  College accepts fewer registration applications from individuals of diverse

    ethnicities and more from Caucasians because the college wants the majority

    of its students to be Caucasian.

Students of diverse ethnicities are expected to be treated equally and fairly as their White counterparts when attending college. Gokce (2013) suggested that the treatment of students should be neutral, and schools should not fixate on group dissimilarities situated on aspects such as racial ethnicity, disability, social status, gender, and sexual orientation. Even though discrimination is illegal by law, unjust and unbiased treatment still persists in education (Gokce).

**Discrimination at Traditional Education Institutions**

African American students often encounter negative campus climates more than their White, Asian, and Latino peers (Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016; Tynes et al., 2013). Research has suggested that African American students were often subjected to various forms of prejudice such as discrimination and racism on college campuses (Baker & Moore, 2015; Brady et al., 2016; Clark et al., 2012; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Grier-Reed & Wilson). In addition to the discrimination and racism encountered, students reported to have also experience stereotyping and microaggression at their college institution (Baker & Moore; Clark et al.).

Grier-Reed and Wilson (2016) reported that an astounding 98.5% of African American students reported experiences of discrimination encountered on their university campus. For instance, the students reported that the steady need to demonstrate their academic competence was a crucial matter of concern for them (Grier-Reed & Wilson).

This aligned with Baker & Moore's (2015) findings in which students in their study spoke of the constant need to demonstrate their competence to faculty and fellow students. Moreover, the students reported they have been given messages that they have to do twice the amount of work, perform twice as better; just to be considered as equal to their White peers (Baker & Moore). Further, students reported they felt stereotyped against by members of faculty and their peers (Baker & Moore) and experienced levels of racial microaggressions (Clark et al, 2012; Suarez-Orozco, 2015).

Students also reported that experiences of micro-aggressions left them feeling isolated, lonely, and unwanted (Clark et al., 2012). Past research suggests that students who have hard times connecting with members of faculty (e.g., instructors, advisors) are likely to have more stress (Taylor & Neimeyer, 2009) or that the quality of the connection with members of faculty influences the students' academic achievements. The latter aligned with findings from Lancaster and Xu (2017) and Zeligman's et al. (2015) research studies that found that components related to educational programs such as mentoring, role modeling, advising, support, and climate positively impacted the academic prosperity of underrepresented students. These program components may not only serve to buffer the effects of discrimination encountered on campus but may also serve to buffer the effects encountered online.

**Discrimination in Online Education Institutions**

Not much research has been conducted among African American students in regard to discrimination encountered in higher education online. Thus, the research available is extremely limited and not well-documented. One study that attempted to

document discrimination in online education is Conway and Bethune (2015). Conway and Bethune examined the relationship of latent attitudes and biases among 147 online teachers with regard to student first names that are ethnically or racially recognizable.

The chief objective of the study was to heighten the awareness in online teachers as they communicate with their students in a non-face-to-face contextual setting. To predict the relationship among the stereotyped names and implicit bias, Conway and Bethune utilized the Brief Implicit Attitudes Test; an instrument designed for a study such as this. The participants ranged from 26 to over 56 years old with a minimum of a master's degree. One hundred and nineteen participants were White, 12 were African American, six were Latino, five were Asian, and three identified as other.

Additionally, the researchers created profiles to help understand the features or qualities of teachers who are more or less likely to be biased against students of color in the online classroom. Conway and Bethune (2015) found that a White male teacher over the age of 56 with a Master of Arts degree and has a minimum of 10 years teaching experience is more likely to display bias against African American names (students). The profile of a teacher who is more likely to display bias against Latino names (students) would also be a White male between the ages of 36 and 45 who also hold a Master of Arts degree, but with only 7-9 years of teaching experience. The profile of an online teacher more likely to be accepting of African American and Latino names (students) is a White female ranging in between the ages of 46 to 55 and holds PhD and is a newcomer to teaching with one to three years' experience.

Research suggests that cultural challenges in online education settings can emerge from the growth of unfairness and injustice deeply rooted in the values of the dominant culture that are depicted in learning materials and procedures (Yeboah & Smith, 2016). Therefore, it is important for educational institutions to have qualified members of faculty and staff who are culturally sensitive, competent, and aware of their own biases. Cultural sensitivity and competency practices are important for creating safe learning environments which supply students with the best possibilities for learning regardless of their ethnicity and linguistic backgrounds and where students are fulfilled and supported (Tuncel, 2017).

The preceding information supports the fact that acts of discrimination such as bias and racial prejudice within online education exists. It is important that the effects of online classroom discrimination be further researched, documented, and addressed in order to prevent diverse students from being on the receiving end of unconscious and prejudice behaviors from members of faculty and student peers.

**Diversity within Online Education**

More college students with diverse backgrounds are now obtaining degrees in higher education through online learning. According to Yeboah and Smith (2016) as more diverse students persist to obtain degrees through online education, students prior cultural temperaments connected with their nationality or age can broadly affect their learning actions, ideas, and/or concepts. Since the beginning of online or blended educational institution programs, African American students have engaged in either entirely online programs or blended learning programs to achieve their educational goals

(Yeboah & Smith). However, Yeboah, Yuan, and Dogbey (2017) stated that some investigators argued that online education programs frequently neglect to acknowledge and discuss the cultural diversity of their students. This could be due to faculty's lack of competency and self-awareness regarding issues pertaining to students of diverse backgrounds and ethnicities.

Baker and Moore (2015) suggested that practicing self-awareness in the presence of cultural and/or ethnic groups would assist educational institutions in becoming culturally competent. The inclusion of different worldviews will not only help to diversify the campus climate but would also help to diversify members of faculty and administration (Baker & Moore). Furthermore, it would provide educational institutions with the proper tools and skills necessary to adequately instruct all students to become efficient morally and cross- culturally (Baker & Moore; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012).

In a study pertaining to diversity within the online learning environment Baig et al. (2014), investigated the influence of demographic factors (age, gender, mother tongue, nature of university) on the online knowledge sharing behavior of minority students enrolled in online management science classes at federally chartered universities in Pakistan. The goal was to determine whether demographic diversity affect how information is shared among students during online class interactions.

Baig et al. (2014) found that nature of university was the only demographic factor that proved an effect on the behavior of online sharing, whereas age, gender, and mother tongue had no effect in predicting online knowledge sharing behavior. In addition, the authors found that when different students are given the same information, they have a

tendency to interpret the information in relation to their experiences resulting in different viewpoints of the same information. That is to say, when knowledge is shared with individuals it is usually influenced by their personal opinions and biases. This lends credence with a past research study that suggested that individuals are usually unconscious of their own racial biases and prejudices, which also specified that an individuals' own experience and internalized thoughts can give rise to racial biases (Uhlmann & Nosek, 2012).

Yeboah and Smith (2016) conducted a study of 149 ethnic minority students using a mixed method approach that combined qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the relationship between minority students' satisfaction, technology, academic performance, and experiences with online education. The intent of the study was to help teachers working with ethnic minority students in online learning formats to obtain a better understanding of the various factors that make teaching easier and more effective for these students.

Results of the study indicated of the 149 students, 134 students reported to have had experienced limited to no support from their online teachers because they had limited knowledge in how to handle and muddle through course management systems. The students also reported that the limited support from some teachers impacted their understanding and method to maneuver through the course management system, and ability to communicate with other students and faculty. The students reported that the aforementioned elements contributed to the low academic performance received. Further, results from open-ended interviews utilized in the study agreed with Tynes et al. (2013)

affirmation that negative stereotypes regarding an individuals' ethnicity or racial group may negatively impact individuals' academic performance. For example, most of the participants (135 out of 149) stated that concerns pertaining to cultural differences such as unclear communication, negative perception, and misunderstanding with some students and faculty during online discussion boards negatively impacted their academic performance.

These adverse and extensive experiences are burdensome and can lead to reduced energy levels, fulfillment, and academic achievement (Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016). For instance, the national center for education statistics (2016), reported that only 39.5% of African Americans who begin college successfully complete their education within 6 years as compared to 61.5% White. Therefore, it is essential to connect these students to areas where they can obtain support and resources to assist in coping in the college/university setting (Grier-Reed & Wilson). This would help to sustain the perseverance and educational survival of African American students (Grier-Reed & Wilson).

## Coping

Lazarus and Folkman (1985) described coping as an attempt to reduce a stressor or an unfavorable psychological response to a stressor. Lazarus and Folkman described the coping process as a way for the body to maintain equilibrium and stability. It helps the individual to maintain mental, emotional, and social adaptation during stressful conditions or circumstances (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Individuals employ different coping strategies in an effort to help manage or reduce stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Unmanaged stress results in an imbalance of equilibrium which can impact an individuals' coping behavior (Lazarus & Folkman, 1985). Coping behavior pertains to the mental and behavioral attempts to control particular external or internal demands that are appraised as challenging or exceeding the resources of the individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1985).

There are a few methods to coping which include problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and avoidant-focused coping (Delahaij & Van Dam, 2017; Madhyastha, Latha, & Kamath, 2014). Problem-focused coping involves employing active attempts directed at handling a difficult matter or situation that is causing stress (Delahaij & Van Dam). Emotion-focused coping refers to strategies (venting, processing, denial, and expressing emotions) used to manage an individuals' emotional response to a stressor (Delahaij & Van Dam; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Avoidant-focused coping is an attempt to physically or psychologically avert from a menacing or harmful situation (Madhyastha et al.). Strategies associated with this method include denial, reducing the result or consequences of a particular matter or situation, and distraction (Romero et al., 2015).

Lazarus and Folkman (1987) formed the concept of coping in two approaches: emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping. As stated by Folkman and Lazarus the role of coping is to adjust the essence of the environment causing the stress or to control stressful emotions. Folkman and Lazarus recognized the adjustment of the environmental stimuli generating stress as problem-focused coping and the controlling of emotions as emotion-focused coping.

Lazarus and Folkman (1985) examined the use of problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping in a study over 1,000 diverse stressful experiences. They found the use of a particular approach to coping is contingent on the essence of the stress and how the stress or stressful situation is appraised at the specific time. To describe the capacity and gravity of an individuals' emotion, Lazarus and Folkman suggested the individual initially appraises a stressful occurrence. Emotions rely upon the individuals' appraisal of the occurrence. For instance, if the individual appraises an incident as menacing, worry and apprehension can emerge. If an individual appraises the incident as challenging, enthusiasm may be evoked. If an individual appraises an incident as damaging or detrimental, rage can surface. If an individual appraises an incident as favorable, satisfaction or reassurance can be evoked. Irmak, Aksel, and Thompson (2016) examined this theory of emotion and coping with college students with a history of childhood sexual abuse experience in Turkey. The goal was to examine the relationship between the type of coping strategy utilized and depression among the participants. The participants were divided into depressive and non-depressive groups according to their depressive symptoms. Data was gathered using the Childhood Sexual Abuse Measurement, the Beck Depression Inventory, and the Coping Styles of Stress Scale. Of the 1,055 students who participated in the study, only a subset (125) students were chosen based on their indication of at least one sexual abuse encounter. Analysis was not included for the participating 900 students who were not sexually abused. The participants consisted of 62 male students and 63 female students with the mean age of 20.18. Results of the study showed that problem-focused coping was linked with fewer

depressive symptoms and emotion-focused coping was linked with more depressive symptoms. The students in the depressive group utilized more emotion-focused coping strategies and less problem-focused coping strategies than the students in the non-depressive group, which in turn, led to the increase in their levels of depression symptoms. Additional findings showed that males and females reported similar depression symptoms and utilize similar coping strategies to cope with stress stemming from childhood sexual abuse.

Chou et al. (2015) conducted a study evaluating the relation between problem-focused coping, emotion-focused, and non-functional strategies and internet addiction along with the moderating effect of depression in Taiwanese college students. The Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced was used to measure how the participants responded when confronted with demanding or stressful situations but not coping with a particular stressful situation. The Chen Internet Addiction Scale was used to evaluate participants' severity of Internet addiction and the Beck Depression Inventory-II was used to assess participants' depressive symptoms.

Of the participants', in Chou et al's (2015) study 238 were male and 262 were female, totaling 500 engaged in the study. Results indicated that among the problem-focused coping strategies, was an inverse correlation between restraint coping and Internet addiction. This indicated that students with a greater propensity to use the restraint coping strategy were less likely to become addicted to the Internet. The students who utilized the emotion-coping strategy of denial were more than likely to have Internet

addiction. The researchers noted a significant relation between denial and internet addiction, but only among college students without significant depression.

Other research found that depressive symptoms and depressive disorders are widespread among individuals who used emotion-focused strategies to cope or manage stress (Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). This is consistent with findings in Irmak et al. (2016) study which suggested that students who use emotion-focused strategies more than problem-focused strategies to cope with stressors have increased levels of depressive symptoms. Additionally, Chou et al (2015) found that students who coped with stress via mental disengagement were more likely to have internet addiction. There were no significant gender differences with regard to the type of coping strategy utilized.

The aforementioned studies described the diverse processes entailed in coping. Individuals do not react or respond to stress in the same manner. How they appraise stress determines their response to stress, and whether the response will be adaptive or maladaptive.

**Differences in Coping among Genders**

Individuals respond to stress differently and use different coping strategies to assist in managing stressors (Delahaij & Van Dam, 2016). Research examining gender differences in coping found that females were more likely to use emotion-focused coping and avoidant styles and males were more likely to use problem-focused coping strategies (Jones, Mendenhall, & Myers, 2016; Sanchez, Smith, & Adams, 2018). However, in Madhyastha et al.'s (2014) study examining gender differences in coping among 94 third year medical students, reported that male students utilized more emotion-coping

strategies such as self-blame and avoidant-coping strategies of denial and disengagement. In addition, female students utilized both problem-focused coping such as instrumental support (obtaining guidance, help or information) and emotion-focused coping such as emotional support seeking (obtaining moral support, sympathy, or gaining understanding when presented with a difficult situation) more than the male students. Moreover, female students encountered more stress associated to academic performance than their male counterparts. Female students encountered more problems associated to schoolwork, testing, competition with peers, and fear of failure.

Ameniya and Wang (2018) conducted a study examining the effects of coping strategies on African American students' academic achievement and whether the coping strategies differed by gender. The participant sample consisted of 274 African American seventh grade students from nine schools within the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Results indicated that males engaged more in problem-solving coping and had grade point averages that were comparable to their female counterparts. Females used more emotion-focused coping such as comfort seeking which led to a decline in achievement. These results are dissimilar with results from Madhyastha et al.'s (2014) study, which indicates males utilizing more emotion-focused coping and females utilizing more problem-focused coping strategies. Perhaps the results from both studies may be due to the gap in the age difference of students.

The aforementioned literature displayed how gender affects the coping responses and reactions to stress. Both males and females reacted differently to stress and utilized both adaptive and maladaptive coping techniques and strategies. Therefore,

understanding gender differences in response to stress is essential to understanding the coping strategies utilized among genders.

**Strategies Students Utilize to Cope with Stress/Stressors**

Students utilize different coping strategies when they encounter stressful situations. Some strategies such as problem-focused guide students to perform effective study habits as they work towards goal accomplishment, handle the stress of test taking, and accomplish favorable results (Bonneville-Roussy, Evans, Verner-Filion, Vallerrand, & Bouffard, 2017). However, some strategies guide students to more unsuccessful study strategies, and maladaptive coping behaviors such as avoidance and procrastination (Bonneville-Roussy et al.). According to Shahid et al. (2017) avoidance coping is utilized in an effort to minimize the stress related with adverse circumstances or emotions by reducing the asperity of the situation, participating in distracting pursuits, or attempting to overlook or avoid the problem or situation. Some examples of this strategy that college students utilize include participating in dangerous or hazardous behavior, alcohol use, and not attending class (Li & Yang, 2016), behavioral disengagement, denial, and substance abuse (Madhyastha et al., 2014).

There is a documented relation between the use of avoidant coping strategies and depression. Romero et al. (2015) indicated that, among students, avoidance coping was correlated with depression and general anxiety disorder. Avoidant coping strategies have been associated with lower academic performance in African American students who experience stress related to racism (Greer, Rick, & Baylor, 2015).

According to Folkman and Lazarus (1985), problem-focused coping is an adaptive coping strategy that entails intentionally addressing the difficult stressor, then participating in a plan of action to settle or master it successfully. An example of problem-focused coping is instrumental social support. Instrumental social support alludes to obtaining support in an effort to cope with problematic situations, which has demonstrated to be successful in managing stress (Fernandez-Gonzalez et al., 2015). Social support plays a vital role in assisting students' adjustment to college life and achievement of their academic goals (Bently-Edwards et al., 2018; Brunsma et al., 2017; Shahid et al., 2017; Zeligman et al., 2015). According to Odafe et al. (2017), social support may play an important role in buffering against stress as well as aid in the protection of students' psychological, physiological, and academic well-being. Students can obtain social support through family, community, friends, social networks, mentors, instructors, professional organizations, and spirituality (Fernandez-Gonzales et al.; Zeligman et al.).

Fernandez-Gonzalez et al. (2015) conducted a study to examine how optimism, self-esteem, and social support assisted in the prediction of academic stress. Participants consisted of 118 students from a university in Spain, in which 93 were female and 25 were male with ages ranging between 20 and 31 years. The behavioral manifestations of stress were predicted by satisfaction with instrumental social support and optimism. The researchers stated that having an optimistic attitude can assist in the process of coping with stressors, along with obtaining support to manage the demands of stress and anxiety more effectively. This aligned with findings in Irmak's et al. (2016) study, which

indicated that problem-focused strategies such as optimism and self-esteem were crucial in supporting psychological health in both male and female college students. Also significant is the evidence that the emotional manifestations of stress are predicted by optimism and pessimism. When the students displayed higher levels of optimism, their emotional manifestations of stress decreased. However, results concerning self-esteem were not statistically significant in this study.

Grier-Reed and Wilson (2016) conducted a study examining the importance of social support to African American students' psychological and academic well-being. They utilized social network analysis to investigate if significant differences existed in the demographic structure and repetitiveness of contact with alters/connections in the ego networks of 32 African American Student Network participants and 193 other African American students at the same university. In network analysis, egocentric networks are constituted of the connections between an ego (a person) and a pair or group of alters (the direct social contacts of an ego; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). In this study, Grier-Reed and Wilson focused on egocentric networks, in which the interest was in how many persons (or alters) students recorded as part of their social network. Of the alters that were recorded, the researchers were interested in the quantity of those individuals who were of the same ethnicity, gender, and college as the student (or ego). A previous study of the African American Student Network conducted by Grier-Reed, Arcinue, and Inman (2015) showed that engaging in the African American Student Network was associated with higher retention and graduation rates in African American students, especially those who encountered hostile campus environments.

The African American Student Network was created to serve the social and psychological needs of African American students who attend class on a predominately White university campus by supplying social support and available means for coping in the university surrounding (Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016). Results showed that the participants in the African American Student Network displayed some differences from the students who did not participate in the Network. First, the participants in the African American Student Network reported more alters/connections in their ego networks than other African American students at the university. Secondly, African American Student Network participants' ego networks included more alters (70%) from the same university than their peers (54%). In other words, African American Student Network participants showed higher rates of retention and graduation than the other African American students on campus. Additionally, participants displayed higher degrees of social integration with more alters altogether and more alters at the same university in their ego networks. Further, results showed that the African American Student Network participants exhibited higher ratios of same race and same gender alters in their ego networks. This study indicates that social integration for the African American Student Network participants may not merely be an action of associating with individuals at the same university, but that discovering commonalities such as same race and same gender is also essentially important (Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016). The review of the literature gathered on coping strategies suggests that it is an important factor for understanding how college students manage and cope with stress, specifically, African American students. Because individuals react and respond to stress differently, it is important to provide insight as to

the coping strategies that African American college students use to help buffer or manage

the effects of stress. This gathered information was pertinent to this study because

African American college students experienced the same types of stressors as their White

peers; however, they also experienced stressors that were unique to their race, ethnicity

and culture. Therefore, it was essential to examine the differences in responses to

stressors among them.

## Summary and Conclusions

Despite the increase in racial and ethnic diversity in colleges and universities

across the United States, racial discrimination persists and has not been eradicated to this

day. For African American students and students of diverse ethnicities, encounters with

racism and discrimination remains a major source of stress (Oadafe et al., 2017). As

reflected in this chapter, numerous publications have addressed the discrimination

experiences of African American students in higher education at traditional brick and

mortar education institutions. However, research regarding the discrimination

experiences encountered in higher education online is limited. Research was needed to

better understand the mental and emotional consequences for African American students

(Odafe et al.) of racism and discrimination within online education.

The review of the literature showed that all individuals perceive and respond to

stress differently and discussed the impact of racism and discrimination within the

educational context as a stressor experienced by African American university students.

This study extends prior research by examining the experiences of African American

students in online universities. It was important for this research study to explore the

coping strategies that African American college students utilize to manage the stressors that are unique to them. The research study provided a deeper understanding of the perceptions and experiences of African American online doctoral students. Study results supported social change by offering insight to staff and faculty at educational institutions with regards to best practices for supporting ethnically diverse students. Specifically, study results informed the best practices to reduce racism and discrimination in the learning environment; support students coping strategies; and promote social, racial, and academic equality. Additionally, this study revealed the need for system-level strategies for student support for discrimination related-stressors. In summary, the literature provided in this chapter revealed there is still a need for African American students to obtain access to available and proper resources that would assist in the management of stress due to discrimination. The findings from this study added to the existing research regarding African American students' experiences of stress related to discrimination.

In chapter 3, I discuss the research procedure for this study. I provide information associated to the research design and rationale, analysis, my role as the researcher, and the methodology used to conduct this study. In addition, I provide information regarding trustworthiness, and ethical considerations, including steps taken to protect the welfare of research participants and informed consent.

Chapter 3: Research Method

**Introduction**

As described in Chapter 1, my purpose for this generic qualitative research study was to explore the experiences of stress related to discrimination among African American students who are participating in online doctoral programs. The results of this study provide information as to how African American students interpret their experiences and how they make meaning of those experiences. My goal for this research study was to develop a deeper understanding of the stressors related to discrimination that are unique to African American students in online doctoral programs.

Included in this chapter are details regarding the research method I used to examine students' perceptions of stress related to discrimination. I describe the procedures that were used in this study, including the research design, participants, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis. Additionally, in this chapter, I describe the actions employed to make certain that issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations were addressed.

**Research Design and Rationale**

I developed the following research questions to explore the experiences of stress related to discrimination among African American students who are participating in online doctoral programs:

RQ1: How do African American online doctoral students describe their experiences of stress related to discrimination in an online program?

RQ2: What discriminatory factors do African American students perceive as

stressors toward earning their doctoral degree?

RQ3: What strategies do African American students utilize to assist in coping with discrimination issues of online education?

In this study, I utilized a generic qualitative approach to explore the experiences of stress related to discrimination among African American online doctoral students. The foundation of qualitative research is built on the belief that understanding is established by individuals in a continuing manner as they participate in and make meaning of an action, experience, or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell described four main features to understanding the essence of qualitative research, including "focus on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive" (p. 15).

Researchers conduct qualitative studies to gain a deeper understanding of complex issues or problems (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This deeper understanding can only be instituted by engaging in conversation with individuals. In a qualitative study, the researcher is the main instrument used to collect and analyze data derived from the participants (Merriam & Tisdell). Through qualitative research, data are examined through the use of non-statistical methods that are not expressed in a numerical format (Creswell). In addition, the data collected are abundantly descriptive. Words and pictures are used instead of numerals to express what the researcher has learned in regard to the phenomenon studied (Merriam & Tisdell). Moreover, qualitative research is inductive because data collected from the interviews are formed in a manner that enable

themes to appear (Creswell; Merriam & Tisdell).

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research gives power and authority to individuals who share their stories by giving them a voice to be heard. In addition, it reduces the power struggle in relationships that frequently occur among the researcher and individuals participating in the research study (Creswell). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that all qualitative research is focused on how meanings are formed and how individuals make sense of those meanings, their lives, and their worlds. However, the main goal of a generic qualitative research study is to expose and interpret those meanings (Merriam & Tisdell). A generic qualitative study is a dynamic process in which the researcher shows interest in understanding the meaning behind a phenomenon experienced by the individuals involved (Merriam & Tisdell). In this type of study, the main concern for the researcher is to understand the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives and not their own.

I chose generic qualitative research as the design for this study because I wanted to provide African American students the opportunity to express their experiences of stress from discrimination within the online educational format. This generic qualitative research approach allowed me to collect in-depth information as to how these students made meaning of their experiences of discrimination. The information gathered allowed me as the researcher to understand and interpret these meanings as African American students recounted their experiences of stress/stressors related to discrimination. As the researcher for this study, it was not only essential for me to describe the design of this study, but it was also essential to understand what my role as the researcher

encompassed. In the following section, I provide information concerning my role as the researcher.

## Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Understanding is the main key of qualitative research. The human instrument, because of its ability to be instantly flexible and quick to respond, would appear to be the best possible method of collecting and analyzing data (Merriam & Tisdell). A qualitative researcher needs to describe certain aspects that he/she might bring to the research study; such aspects include awareness of self, biases, values, and experiences (Creswell, 2013). As the researcher of this qualitative study, I asked the participants open-ended questions that yielded information that was abundantly rich in details that assisted in understanding the results (see Creswell, 2009). I collected, recorded, transcribed, interpreted, and maintained the confidentiality of data for this study. In addition, I analyzed the data and identified commonality of themes. Using a generic qualitative design, my purpose was to listen carefully and attempt to fully understand how participants interpreted and made sense of their experiences regarding discrimination as well as the meaning attributed to their experiences. Lastly, my role was to uncover and interpret those meanings (Merriam & Tisdell).

Along with the description of my role as researcher, I believe it is important to provide insight into my background. I am a first-generation doctoral student, pursuing a Ph.D. in General Psychology-Teaching. I obtained a Bachelor of Science in Psychology

in 2010 from a traditional face-to-face educational institution and a Master of Arts in

Community Counseling in 2013 from a university that combined both online and

traditional classroom learning; a method known as blended learning. While obtaining my

bachelor's and master's degrees, I experienced both gender and racial discrimination

from my instructors on several occasions. These experiences were emotionally and

physically disturbing; however, they did not deter me from continuing my education.

During this time, I had the opportunity to substitute teach at the county and city schools

in the residing areas within my community. I had the opportunity to not only teach

students the curriculum but also provide assistance and guidance to help resolve

academic, social, and sometimes, but not often, personal issues they encountered. This

was an invaluable experience because it taught me the importance of being

nonjudgmental concerning others, especially when their circumstances are unknown.

This experience further ignited my interest in psychology and guided me to enroll in the

online Ph.D. in Psychology-Teaching program at Walden University where I conducted

my study.

Because there were no associations personally or professionally with the

participants, no conflict of interest existed, or did I possess power over them. My aim in

this research was to ensure that all participants were treated respectfully and equitably

and that I maintained confidentiality of all their information. Because I could empathize

with this study population, I took special precaution to ensure that any bias I had when

collecting, interpreting, and describing the data was controlled for. To control for bias, I

prepared interview questions in a manner that was objective and not influenced by my

own personal feelings or opinions. The key factor was to allow participants to describe their feelings and thoughts about the phenomenon without distorting the information elicited (Smith & Noble, 2017). To empower the participants in this study, I allowed them the opportunity to voice their experiences in their own words. This helped to control any feelings of a power struggle between them and myself as the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Input furnished to this study stemmed from the analysis and the written accounts of the information collected. Generally, my aim was to describe the results of the study through query and analysis of reporting. The written accounts were composed of themes and experiences supplied by the participants engaged in the study. In the subsequent section, I describe the methodology used for the selection of participants for this study.

## Methodology

Participants in this study consisted of African American students who were participating in online doctoral programs. The results of this study provided insight into how African American doctoral students experienced stress related to discrimination within the online educational format. This research study was conducted through an online university. I contacted the university to request authorization to access the participants through the university's participant pool (06-06-0517119). The participants were asked to complete a consent form prior to participating in the study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the relation between the researcher and participant is paramount to the quantity and quality of data gathered; therefore, I made

attempts to ensure that physical ease and rapport building with the participants were established.

**Participant Selection Logic**

In this study, I examined a specific population, one that had not been assiduously examined within the online educational format. I explored the experiences of stress related to discrimination among African American doctoral students who were currently enrolled in online education programs. In order to participate in this study, the participants had to be enrolled in programs administered exclusively online. The participants consisted of eight African American doctoral students who were willing to complete a one-on-one Skype interview (see Appendix), which took approximately 60 to 90 minutes to complete. Participants considered for this study had to be current doctoral students in an online program, over the age of 18 years old, and of African American descent. The purpose of these criteria was to select participants who could help me examine the stressors of discrimination they perceive in their current experiences online.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested researchers can use purposeful sampling once the criterion has been determined when selecting the individuals or sites to be examined. For this study, I selected the participants through purposeful sampling based upon meeting the criterion essential to this study. Several writers have perceived the difference among different kinds of purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Patton, 2015). I chose convenience sampling to gain access to the participants in this study. I chose this form of sampling because of the convenient location and accessibility to the study participants. Creswell reported that there is no

single desirable suggestion for sample size in a qualitative study since generalizing

information is not the intent, with the exception of some types of case studies, but to

explain the specific in terms of sample size (Pinnegar & Danynes, 2007). However,

Creswell suggested examining a few sites or individuals to gather broad information

about each individual studied until data saturation is reached. Boddy (2016) conducted a

study on the subject of sample size in qualitative research and found the number of in-

depth interviews conducted determined data saturation rather than sample size. Boddy

stated that an appropriate qualitative sample size to help produce a more meaningful and

timely qualitative analysis should range from six to 12 participants.  Because qualitative

research requires a great deal of labor, analyzing a large sample could be unrealistic and

excessive (Boddy).

**Instrumentation**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument utilized for the

collection and analysis of data (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To elicit the

descriptive and detailed responses needed for this study, I asked the participants to

participate in a comprehensive, semi structured, Skype interview following an interview

protocol that I formulated (see Appendix). According to Patton (2015), the purpose of

conducting interviews in qualitative research is to acquire a certain type of information,

then provide the information from the participants' point of view. I conducted the

interviews using a protocol that allowed me to ask open-ended questions presented in a

semi structured format as suggested by Creswell and Merriam and Tisdell. The interview

protocol (see Appendix) was crafted to prompt African American doctoral students to

share their experiences of stress related to discrimination within the online educational format. The protocol was used as a guide, not only to help me gather the information needed, but to also stay focused on the purpose of the interview, which was to gain a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. My goal was to use the protocol to deliver the interview questions in a manner that enabled the participants to share their experiences and perceptions about discrimination and to understand the meaning they attribute to these experiences.

I began each interview with a warm-up session as an effort to build rapport and help the participant feel at ease. It was important as the researcher to create positive interactions between myself and the study participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Being respectful, nonjudgmental, and nonthreatening, I was able to create an atmosphere where each participant was able to express his or her thoughts, feelings, and opinions freely, without fear of being judged. Each interview was conducted online through Skype and was recorded on the computer. I transcribed each interview verbatim. To protect the privacy of the study participants, each recording was saved on my computer, which is password protected, along with an extra copy that was saved on a portable flash drive. All data will be preserved for 5 years and destroyed at the completion of 5 years.

**Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of stress related to discrimination among African American students who were currently enrolled in online doctoral programs and have college experience at a traditional institution. My desire was to acquire six to 10 participants through the university's participant pool at the

online university they attend. However, only two students agreed to participate. Since I was not successful in my attempt to acquire a minimum of six participants, I contacted the university to request authorization to access students via social media as an additional strategy to recruit. This helped me obtain additional depth for the study and in reaching data saturation as well. The criteria for participation in this study was produced and made available to the university. Included in the criteria was that all participants had to be of African American descent, had to be a current doctoral student enrolled in an program administered exclusively online, had previous experience at a traditional higher education institution, were willing to complete a one-on-one Skype interview, and were over the age of 18. Once interest in the study was confirmed by participants and they confirmed they met all criteria for the study, I submitted a letter of invitation to participants via e-mail welcoming them to participate in the study. Correspondence regarding the Skype interviews and follow-up information if needed were established via phone conversations and e-mail.

Each potential participant was given an informed consent form to review thoroughly. I briefed the participants about the procedures for informed consent to ensure they were fully aware of what they were agreeing to and were aware of any risks or costs that were involved. However, for this study, only minimal risks or costs were involved. In addition, I informed the participants that participation in the study was strictly voluntary and at any time they could choose not to participate in the study even after they had consented. Once the consent form was reviewed, I asked each participant to sign the consent form and return it to me before the commencement of the interview.

At the start of the interview, I thanked each participant for consenting to take part in the study. As mentioned earlier, I conducted a one-on-one in-depth Skype interview with each participant. Each interview session lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. Schedule times for the interviews were based on participant availability. I asked open-ended questions that related to the online experiences of stress related to discrimination among African American students in doctoral programs. I asked the interview questions in a manner that yielded descriptive data that allowed the participants to describe their experiences in full detail. At the end of the interview session, I thanked each participant again for their participation in the research study. Participants were given contact information for any questions or concerns they had regarding the study. To ensure accuracy of participants' comments and statements, I utilized member checking to rule out the likelihood of misunderstanding the meaning of what participants stated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants received a transcript copy of their interview via email to confirm my interpretation of the data they provided was true and accurate.

**Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis encompasses the preparation, organization, and management of data in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is the series of actions or steps taken to make sense and meaning out of the data collected. Because of the voluminous information contained in qualitative research, it is essential for researchers to keep data organized and managed early in the analysis process (Creswell; Merriam & Tisdell). For this study, data were collected from participants who satisfied

the qualification requirements for the study. The data analysis centered on the components that offer insight regarding the research questions.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the first phase in data analysis begins with reading the transcript, field notes taken from the initial observation, or initial documents several times each. The Skype interviews I conducted were recorded using QuickTime player for Windows. I listened to the participants' responses several times to obtain the information for transcribing. I wrote notes in the margins of the transcripts regarding reflections, ideas, tentative themes, and observations from the first interview and compared with notes taken from the second interview and so on (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell). I transcribed the responses from participants verbatim to verify the accuracy of the transcription. The information collected from the interviews was logged into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to assist in keeping the information organized, then saved to my password-protected computer and portable flash drive.

In the next phase, I incorporated the use of NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software package to assist in categorizing and coding the data collected. I examined the data, identifying emerging themes that were prevalent among participants and arrange them according to their similarities. In accordance with Creswell (2013) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the identification of major themes is utilized to divide data into separate categories. I assigned each category a code to identify patterns, trends, and key quotes to assist with answering the research questions inquired within this study. I compiled the categories and clustered into themes, which provided descriptive accounts of the information (Merriam & Tisdell).

I repeated the process of reviewing the information identifying categories and themes to see whether they occurred in subsequent data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, Merriam and Tisdell suggested as researchers analyze data that are being collected, they must consider making decisions that narrow the research. Merriam and Tisdell suggested that researchers should discipline themselves not to follow up or proceed with all themes that emerge. This would prevent having too much research to diffuse; therefore, I omitted or discarded themes that were irrelevant with the developing structure. I ensured that themes and reflections of participants' experiences were written in a manner that explained their experiences in their own words (Merriam & Tisdell).

## Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility (internal validity) can be described as, the extent to which results developed in a study are accurate and justifiable (Polit & Beck, 2012). In qualitative analysis, credibility is operationalized by how adequately the research depicts the actual phenomenon (Morse, 2015). Prolonged or adequate engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, and members checking are strategies that can be utilized to achieve credibility (Morse). To rule out the possibility of misinterpreting the experiences of what participants shared in the interviews, I used member checking so that the participants could validate and verify that the findings were a true representation of what they shared (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checking is the process in which the researcher returns an interview or analyzed data to a participant to acknowledge if the information proves accurate (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell & Walter, 2016).

In qualitative research, interested readers should be able to apply the results of the study to similar situations or individuals they have encountered (Morse, 2015). I accomplished transferability by providing a detailed, rich, and thick description of the analysis in this study. This allows readers and other researchers to make a cognizant decision as to whether the results can be applied and transferred to their own situation and/or research (Morse). If the results of my study can be associated to the experiences of the readers or situations of the researchers, then it meets the criteria for transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Morse).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), dependability is equal to reliability and alludes to the ability to acquire the same results if the study were to be replicated (Morse, 2015). Dependability can be achieved with the use of such strategies as an audit trail and triangulation (Morse; Renz, Carrington, & Badger, 2018). An audit trail contains the documents, such as field notes, transcripts, reports, and, journals recorded throughout the research process. It is used by the researcher to thoroughly describe how decisions were made, and how categories were obtained (Gray, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Triangulation is a process in which several methods are used such as journals, notes, and interviews to collect data to further enhance understanding of the phenomenon (Morse, 2015). Renz et al. (2018) suggested that triangulation may increase the validity of the study and reduce researcher bias and provide several views of the phenomenon being studied. To ensure that my study met credibility and confirmability requirements, I used triangulation and reflexivity strategies. I documented thoughts, ideas, insights, perceptions, and responses pertaining to the data. I continued documentation throughout

the analysis process and all documentations were recorded in a reflexive journal. A

reflexive journal includes notes about the researchers' increasing knowledge regarding

the phenomenon's meaning, as well as decisions made in regard to the methods used

(Lincoln & Guba).

Confirmability was obtained in this study through the use of triangulation, audit

trails, and maintaining a reflective journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I provided details to

explain how data were collected, recorded, interpreted, and analyzed. I maintained a

journal of my thoughts and awareness about the phenomenon and events that occurred

during the process of this research study. I made notes during and after each interview to

help me recall details the participants' shared with me that may prove significant to this

study. As a qualitative researcher, it is important to practice self-awareness throughout

the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Therefore, I maintained a journal of my self-reflections, in terms of my own thoughts,

behaviors, beliefs, and values. This ensured that the interpretation was grounded in the

data rather than my perceptions and partialities (Korstjens & Moser). I made notes in

regard to my responses, responses of the participants, and to the analysis process overall.

The notes in my reflective journal provided an understanding as to how the themes

emerged from the collected data.

### Ethical Procedures

Researchers are required to obtain ethical approval from the college or

university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to conducting a research study

(Roberts, 2015). This is to ensure that the ethical standards and procedures are upheld

throughout the research process (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval prior to the commencement of the study. I posted my study through Walden University's participant pool where participants were to be recruited for the study. However, only two students agreed to participate, so a request was made to the IRB to utilize social media as another strategy for recruitment. Upon approval, I submitted a letter via e-mail to each student who expressed interest in participating in the study. I informed each participant about the nature, purpose, and benefits of the study and gave them the opportunity to ask any questions they had about the study. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and that their participation was strictly voluntary. Each participant was given a confidentiality form and an informed consent form to complete. Once completed, the forms were saved to my password-protected computer and portable flash drive. No distress, risk, or harm was involved in this study. This was clearly described in the informed consent form which participants reviewed and signed prior to being interviewed.

Confidentiality regarding participants' privacy was guaranteed throughout the research process. To maintain confidentiality, I assigned a number to each participant, which was used to help identify one participant from the other. No identifiable information about the participants was revealed to anyone at any time. All interview transcripts will be locked in the researcher's office for 5 years and destroyed at the completion of 5 years. As stated earlier in this study, I had no relationship with any of the potential participants selected for this study. Therefore, no power differential was exercised between me as the researcher and the participants.

**Summary**

In Chapter 3, I have provided information that described the research design and explained the rationale for this generic qualitative study. I provided information in regard to the methodology I used for this study as well as my role as researcher for this study. I presented the procedures to ensure the establishment of trustworthiness for this study and the efforts I made to keep research biases and misinterpretations on my behalf to a minimum. This chapter also presented ethical issues describing the privacy and protection of the potential participants for this study. In Chapter 4, I will present the results from the analyzed data.

Chapter 4: Results

## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of stress related to discrimination among African American students who are currently enrolled in online doctoral programs. In this chapter, I provide the procedures used for conducting the interview sessions, the participants' demographics, and the results of the interviews. The research questions for this study are as follows:

RQ1: How do African American online doctoral students describe their experiences of stress related to discrimination in an online program?

RQ2: What discriminatory factors do African American students perceive as stressors toward earning their doctoral degree?

RQ3: What strategies do African American students use to assist in coping with discrimination issues of online education?

In this chapter, I provide data collected from the interviews with eight African American doctoral students regarding their experiences of stress from discrimination. In addition, information regarding the setting, data collection, and data analysis are also provided. Other segments included in this chapter are evidence of trustworthiness and results of the study.

## Setting

Participants in this study consisted of African American doctoral students who were receiving their doctoral education exclusively online. I sought data that would provide information regarding how this population experienced stress from

discrimination in online doctoral education. I conducted this study through an online university. The university provided me with authorization to access the participants, African American doctoral students, through the university's participant pool and through social media. Only two students signed up to participate through the participant pool; therefore, a request was made to the IRB to use social media as another recruitment strategy. Upon receiving IRB approval, I posted the study on social media. Within 2 weeks of posting the study on social media, I received calls from six students who met the criteria and were eager to participate in the research study.

## Demographics

Participants for this study consisted of eight African American students who were receiving their doctoral education exclusively online. All participants were students at a large, online university. Participants included in this study were three males and five females, whose age ranged from 35 to 53 years old. I selected participants from multiple areas of study, including Counselor Education and Supervision (three students), Health Psychology (one student), Educational Psychology (three students), and Clinical Psychology (one student). All participants completed all major coursework and were working on their dissertations at the time of this study.

## Data Collection

I conducted eight interview sessions using Skype, a software application that provided a virtual face-to-face contact with each participant. All interviews were conducted using an interview protocol that I designed using open-ended questions presented in a semi structured format as suggested by Creswell (2013) and Merriam and

Tisdell (2016). I initially anticipated that interviews would last 60–120 minutes; however, the actual time varied between 60–90 minutes. Prior to each interview, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study via telephone conversation.

Each Skype interview was recorded on and saved to my password-protected computer and portable flash drive. I informed each participant that during the interview session I would take notes to observe any changes in facial expression and body language as they discussed their experiences of discrimination in online education. Throughout the interview and data analysis process, I maintained a reflexive journal to document my thoughts, responses, and ideas that pertained to the data. This reflexive journal was used to control for bias I may have regarding my own experiences so that I could concentrate on the experiences of the participants.

After each interview was conducted and transcribed, each participant received a copy of the transcript via e-mail to review. Participants contacted me via phone and confirmed that the information they provided was true and accurately documented and that no modifications were necessary. This was done to ensure that my interpretation of what the participants shared was accurate. In qualitative research, this method is known as member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checking is used to rule out the likelihood of misunderstanding the meaning of what participants stated (Merriam & Tisdell).

My original plan for data collection was to obtain between six and 10 participants from the university's participant pool to participate in the study; however, only two students from this pool agreed to participate. Since I was not successful in my first

attempt to acquire at least six participants, I made a request to the IRB for permission to use social media as another strategy for recruitment. Through social media, I recruited six additional participants who met the inclusion criteria, yielding a total of eight participants. Prior to the interview, all participants reviewed the informed consent and indicated their consent by replying with the words, "I consent," via e-mail. When data collection was complete, I transcribed all interviews in preparation for data analysis.

**Data Analysis**

I began analyzing the data following data collection and transcription. As I transcribed the interviews, I was fully immersed in the data, which helped me familiarize myself with what participants said in their interviews and led to me beginning to notice commonalities in the interviews. I made note of these commonalities as possible codes to use in later steps of the analysis. When I was finished transcribing the interviews, I began the coding process. I first uploaded all interview transcripts into NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software that facilitates the organization of qualitative data. When coding in NVivo 12, all passages of text (e.g., words and sentences) related to the research questions were coded. I used descriptive codes, in which I gave a brief title to the coded passages, and in vivo codes, where the coded passages were titled verbatim from participants' interviews. An example of this coding process is presented in Table 1 (see page 83).

The coding of all transcripts yielded a list of codes that I analyzed further based on the relationships between these codes and the ways the codes related to or addressed the research questions. I placed codes that were very similar, such as those that expressed

**Table 1**

*Example of Coding Process*

| Raw Data | Code |
|---|---|
| "You assumed that I was non ethnic because you felt like a person of color would not present themselves as/or whatever the case." | Microaggressions |
| "I just felt like…in ways I kinda felt like belittled because of the study that I was doing on African American mothers." | Perceived discrimination from chair associated with research study topic |
| "Personal factors were self-care. That was a big one for me." | Self-care helped stress due to discrimination |

**Table 2**

*Example of Code Placement into Larger Categories*

| Codes | Categories |
|---|---|
| • Discrimination from chair<br>• Experience discrimination from faculty of color<br>• Issues of power in discrimination by faculty<br>• Perceived discrimination from chair associated with research study topic | Discrimination by those in power |
| • Discrimination by faculty in the classroom<br>• Feeling that ethnic name led to discrimination online<br>• Assumptions made about me based on my class photo or name | Discrimination based on assumptions |
| • More comfortable calling colleagues out on discrimination<br>• No discrimination from colleagues<br>• Same amount of discrimination from colleagues as faculty | Discrimination from Colleagues |

similar sentiments or used similar language or wording, together into larger categories.

For example, all participants told me about the people who perpetrated discrimination

against them in the online university and where this discrimination occurred. Upon

examining these stories, I identified a primary category of discrimination and three

subcategories based on the setting of the discrimination: discrimination by gatekeepers,

discrimination in the classroom, and discrimination from colleagues. An example of this

process is presented in Table 2 on page 83.

I examined all codes in the code list and looked for other codes that were similar,

placing them into larger categories based on similarity. Upon deeper examination, I

determined that some codes did not fit well with other codes, or they did not have enough

support (either through number of participants who contributed to the code or the number

of total references in the code) to stand on their own as a possible subtheme, and these

codes were discarded.

After I finished grouping the codes into these larger categories, I examined these

categories further to determine if there were existing relationships between the categories.

In this step of analysis, I placed similar categories together into larger categories based on

similarity, where appropriate. The similar smaller categories became the subthemes and

the new, larger categories became the themes. This process yielded the final thematic

structure of the findings in hierarchical form, from codes to subthemes to themes. I

aligned these to the three research questions of this study. I gave all themes and

subthemes a descriptive title, and this final thematic structure is presented in Table 3 (see

page 86). In the results section of this chapter, I discuss these themes and subthemes in greater depth and in relation to the research questions.

**Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are characteristics necessary to establish trustworthiness in research. To establish credibility is to adequately interpret the information that participants shared (Morse, 2015). I accomplished credibility through transcript review. I sent each participant a copy of their transcribed interview and asked them to review it and contact me via phone or e-mail if any of the information was a misrepresentation of what they conveyed. All eight of the participants called me once they received and reviewed their transcripts. All participants informed me that the transcripts were accurate and that no modifications were necessary.

I accomplished transferability by providing a detailed, rich, and thick description of the data in this study and by purposeful sampling so that readers and other researchers can make a cognizant decision as to whether the results are applicable and transferable to their own research (see Morse, 2015). All eight participants met the criteria to partake in this study. I reached saturation by the fifth interview, but conducted three more interviews to see if different information would appear; however, no new information emerged. Regarding data saturation, researchers should consider quality and not quantity of the gathered data (Boddy, 2016). Boddy (2016) also stated that an appropriate qualitative sample size should range from six to 12 participants. I obtained comprehensive data regarding participants' experiences with eight participants.

**Table 3**

*Thematic Structure Aligned to Research Questions*

| Research Questions | Themes | Subthemes |
|---|---|---|
| RQ1. How do African American online doctoral students describe their experiences of stress related to discrimination in an online program? | 1. Experiencing stress and discrimination | No discernible subthemes |
| RQ2. What discriminatory factors do African American students perceive as stressors toward earning their doctoral degree? | 2. Discrimination is perpetuated by faculty and academic chairs | 2a. Discrimination by those in power<br>2b. Discrimination from colleagues<br>2c. Discrimination based on assumptions |
| RQ3. What strategies do African American students utilize to assist in coping with discrimination issues of online education? | 3. Alleviating discrimination in online education | No discernible subthemes |
| | 4. Managing stress and discrimination | 4a. Support system of family and friends<br>4b. Turning stress into motivation<br>4c. Relying on faith of manage stress |

To establish dependability of the research findings, I provided a rich and thick description of the data, including illustrative quotes made by participants. I also employed triangulation through notes and interviews, reflexive journaling, and member checking. Through reflexive journaling, I noted my own experiences and beliefs after each interview.

I accomplished confirmability by way of triangulation, audit trails, and reflective journaling (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I provided details that explained how data were collected, recorded, and analyzed as well as maintained a reflexive journal of my thoughts and biases that occurred during the research study. This was an important aspect because it enabled me to maintain my composure when participants' emotions became heightened. I made notes during and after each interview to help me recall significant details the participants shared with me and to ensure that the interpretation remained grounded in the data rather than my perceptions and partialities (see Korstjen & Moser, 2018). The notes in my reflective journal provided an understanding as to how I created the themes that emerged from the collected data.

## Results

### Theme 1: Experiencing Stress and Discrimination

Theme 1 addressed the first research question: How do African American online doctoral students describe their experiences of stress related to discrimination in an online program? Data analysis revealed African American online doctoral students experienced myriad emotions as a result of discrimination and stress. I created this theme based on the language participants used to describe their experiences of stress and discrimination. I

looked specifically at the words that participants used, like *anger, depression, disappointment,* and *self-doubt.* In addition to this language, I noted participants' use of body language and paralanguage when they spoke of their experiences. Participants spoke with nervous laughter and some teared up and cried during their interviews.

Four of eight participants (50%) described feeling angry at the discrimination they had experienced. Participants tied this anger to different experiences with faculty and the university. One participant felt like as an African American, the coursework was much harder to get through than it was for white students. Participant 3 said, "Well, the first thing I felt was anger. I felt a lot of anger." After this, Participant 3 felt an emotion like resignation. Participant 3 said:

> I've been going through this my entire life, what else is new? I'm going to have to work not one, two, three, but ten times harder than my Caucasian counterparts just to be able to have the same degree that they have. Uh, and I know that I am an intelligent person, um, and I know that it's discriminatory, I know it is.

Another participant felt similar feelings of anger but spoke about this in the context of the impersonal relationships that professors had with students. Participant 4 began school believing that professors were "there to help," but came to believe otherwise after taking more classes. "I thought the professors were there to help," said Participant 4, "You know, if that professor couldn't help me, then maybe they could have passed me along to one of their colleagues." Participant 4 believed this was because professors promoted a business model as opposed to a university truly interested in helping students. Rather than passing students along to a colleague, Participant 4 noted

that professors strung students along so those professors could say, according to

Participant 4, that they had fulfilled a certain quota. "I felt it was more about the business

than it was about helping or directing the student," Participant 4 stated.

Participant 7 saw a discrepancy between the mission of the university and

professors' behavior. This discrepancy made Participant 7 feel angry because this

participant felt the faculty should uphold the university's mission.

> This university's mission is reflective of social change. If you are hiring faculty
>
> that are giving these experiences to your students and if the students come to you
>
> with these issues and nothing is truly being done, then are you truly about your
>
> mission? And then, are you a part of the systematic (sic) oppression? (Participant
>
> 7).

Participants also experienced depression that they attributed to the stress of

discrimination. Four participants (50%) said they felt depressed at some point in their

doctoral career. Participant 4 described the doctoral process as "a terrible and depressing

time for me." Participant 1 experienced this depression in conjunction with frustration

during the process of obtaining final University Research Reviewer (URR) approval,

which is the university's final quality assurance review for the dissertation. Participant 1

described the process and feeling of depression in the following way:

> I felt like there had to be something else. So, I wasn't particularly upset with the
>
> university as a whole, but I felt like there had gotta be another way, like I said, I
>
> was looking at maybe if I find another URR…I don't know what the process for
>
> that is and I didn't think that it should be necessary to have to do that but, um, that

was where I was at. You know, like I said, I was pretty depressed for…not only

was I frustrated but I was also depressed.

For one participant, this depression led to dark place which included suicidal

ideations. Through tears, Participant 7 described spiraling into a depression that left her

contemplating suicide for the first time in her life.

I have never…there was a point where I have never before in my life had

contemplated suicide, but I did during my dissertation and I was literally behind

the wheel of my vehicle getting ready to drive into somebody's house. And I

prayed, and I said, "You know, God, if this is not what you want for me, please do

something to let me know." And soon, immediately after I said it, my phone, my

cousin called me and was like, "Hey cuz, how you doing?" I just pulled over,

stopped the car, and started crying, and we talked. (Participant 7)

Coupled with feelings of depression, participants also invoked the term *alone* to

describe their experience of discrimination. Though no participant spoke about feeling

alone or isolated due to being enrolled in an online doctoral degree program, the solitary

nature of online education may play a role in this feeling of being alone. Participant 8 felt

like "[I was] the only one going through this," while working toward the doctoral degree.

Participant 2 believed that his colleagues could not always help him, which caused him to

feel lonely and unable to relate to others. "I felt that I wasn't getting the help from my

chair, you know, and so, I felt alone, so alone a lot of the times," described Participant 2,

"You know, you talk to your friends or colleagues who are going through it, but at the

end of the day…what might have helped your colleague might not help for you." This

feeling of being alone was something Participant 4 experienced as well, also in terms of not receiving desired help. "I felt all alone, because when I asked the school for help, I did not receive it," said Participant 4. "I was made to look like the bad guy or made to look as if I didn't know what I was doing," Participant 4 continued.

In addition to feelings of isolation, depression, and anger, three participants (38%) were overcome described feelings of self-doubt and lack of confidence in their ability to complete the dissertation as a result of the discrimination they experienced. Participant 2 felt frustration that, after all the money and time spent on coursework and dissertation hours, he was left with feelings of self-doubt.

Thinking about all the time that I spent, all the hours that I've dedicated to this program, all the money, just to feel inadequate, like I didn't know what I was doing…so, I began to listen to the negative thoughts in my head, started doubting myself, and asking if this is the right thing to do, am I sure that I wanna continue on this route. (Participant 2)

Participant 2 was not the only participant who experienced this self-doubt, nor was he the only participant whose self-doubt contributed to the desire to leave the doctoral program. Participant 1 wondered if she had made the right decision to pursue a PhD. And as Participant 8 shared, "I felt like I just wanted to quit at time and just give up. It made me doubt myself; my self-confidence was affected by all this."

In answer to RQ1, African American online doctoral students described their experiences of stress related to discrimination in an online program in emotional language, using emotional terms. These students described feelings of loneliness,

isolation, and depression, feelings that, for at least one participant, led to contemplating suicide. These students described being angry with faculty and chairs as a result of perceived discrimination. Likely because of these emotions and experiences, participants saw their self-confidence decline to the point where they considered dropping out of school altogether. Participants felt they had nowhere to turn for help and questioned their decisions to begin a doctoral program in the first place.

**Theme 2: Discrimination is perpetuated by Faculty and Academic Chairs**

Theme 2 addressed RQ 2, which asked, what discriminatory factors do African American students perceive as stressors toward earning their doctoral degree? I created this theme based on the ways in which participants described both whom and where the perceived discrimination toward them came from. Participants described feeling discriminated against by gatekeepers like faculty, academic chairs, and (URR) reviewers. Participants felt they were discriminated against in the online classroom, particularly in the class discussion boards, grading, and the feedback professors gave. Participants held a variety of opinions on discrimination perpetuated by colleagues. Three subthemes support the creation of this theme: discrimination by gatekeepers, discrimination in the online classroom, and discrimination by colleagues.

**Subtheme 2a: Discrimination by those in power.** Individuals with power over students perpetuated discrimination toward African American online students particularly when it came to dissertation topics and the URR reviewers. Six of eight (75%) of participants described feeling like they were discriminated against based on their dissertation topics. This discrimination came from academic chairs and URR reviewers,

and participants attributed this discrimination to their dissertation research topics. Participants noted that, when observing their white colleagues, those colleagues did not face the same challenges, and many of these colleagues finished their dissertations more quickly than participants. In turn, this mean that, as Participant 3 stated, "My education is costing me more…than my Caucasian counterparts."

For Participant 1, this discrimination came from the URR reviewer during the proposal review, where this participant felt discriminated against because of her research topic. Participant 1 described this discrimination as "never anything blatant" but said that the discrimination "felt ugly" and "was a deterrence to my progress." Participant 1 described:

> The URR just said, "Well, I don't understand why we would need to look at burnout in mothers of color." Well, I felt like I had supported the fact that yes, we do know a lot about burnout, but all of the studies out here at that point were saying, "Well, we need more diverse information, we need more information on populations that don't just look one way." And the other piece of it was there is almost no information on students in online programs at this point, you know, it's newer still, so there isn't a lot of research there, so I thought to my mind, and to the mind of my chair and my second, that I'd done a good enough job to explain and express that.

Participant 1 interpreted this feedback from the URR reviewer as discrimination because the population of the study was mothers of color, and Participant 2 described a similar situation, also attributing the discrimination to the research topic and population.

However, Participant 2 experienced this discrimination from the second dissertation chair he was assigned to work with. Participant 2 said that his second dissertation chair "made me feel stupid, like I didn't know what I was talking about." This participant felt like his chair did not understand the research topic or what this participant was trying to accomplish. Participant 2 noted the irony in this, given that the research topic was on mentoring African American students:

> First, it was this type of thing, then that or the other, I mean, it was horrible and my dissertation topic deals with mentoring black students in online education and what I got from him was…it seemed like he felt that mentoring is mentoring, and all students go through stress, bias, things like that, and that all students are equal; like my study is not relevant or my topic not important enough. You know, I mean that's how he made me feel.

Participant 4 also shared the experience of being discriminated against based on research population. Participant 4 proposed to study African American mothers, like Participant 1, and received discriminatory feedback from the dissertation chair. Participant 4 felt that the chair did not understand the topic or culture of the participants, which Participant 4 said was "not my fault." Participant 8 also described this sentiment. "I mean, I felt like just because you don't know much about Black people, that's not my problem," said Participant 8. Participant 4 believed the chair should not have accepted her as a doctoral student. Participant 4 described feeling "belittled," which she attributed to the research population:

In ways, I kind felt, like, belittled because of the study that I was doing on African American mothers and their association with childhood obesity in my area. You know, my chair was always questioning why I was studying that topic, which I understand because they do ask that, but it was more so like, whenever we talked about it, my chair would always try to deter me away from it to study something else. It was more like my chair wanted me to stray from it.

Participant 5 attributed the discrimination he faced to the dissertation topic. This participant proposed a topic based on microaggression, though did not elaborate on details of the topic. "I feel that if my topic was on love and peace, or something like that, none of this would have happened," said Participant 5. Participant 5 thought that if he challenged this situation, the school would say that the reviewers are blind and "don't know who you are or what ethnicity you are." Importantly, Participant 5 made the connection that "the topic itself lets [the reviewers] know who the person is who is conducting the study."

This sentiment that Participant 5 expressed was a commonality amongst participants. While participants did not describe experiencing blatant discrimination against them personally, they believed that the discrimination toward research topics and populations was an indirect form of discrimination against them. These participants then attributed this discrimination to their race. For Participant 1, this led to a lot of questioning. "It took me really getting frustrated and having to approach it from, 'well, maybe it's not a race thing,' and again, it wholeheartedly felt like it was a race thing at that point," explained Participant 1. Participant 3 also attributed this to race: "So, the only

thing I can think of that they know is that I am African American, that's the only thing I can think of because there's no other reason for it."

**Subtheme 2b: Discrimination by colleagues.** Six of eight (75%) of participants described experiences of discrimination from colleagues, or lack thereof. Variation arose in this subtheme, as half of these participants reported experiencing discrimination and half said they did not face discrimination from colleagues. Those participants who reported discrimination from colleagues said this discrimination was the same amount as or more than the discrimination from faculty. "I think [the professors] had to be…I really didn't feel it from them as much…it was more from my peers, you know, colleagues," described Participant 6. Participant 6 was surprised by this, given that the program was for counseling and counseling education, and Participant 6 did not think future counselors would behave in discriminatory ways.

Participant 7 described specifically how colleagues enacted discrimination, especially in the online classroom:

What I find in the classroom is less engagement from my counterparts, more criticism on my posts…or maybe not criticism but more of probing, like, "how did you come to that conclusion?" or finding research that may not necessarily negate what I'm saying, but there was nothing that helped support my findings. So, I would always have to go back and find…whatever they would post I would have to go back and find, you know, 3-5 more articles and support it…So, you know, it was like this constant battle that I had to provide myself that I belong here.

Though participants felt some discrimination from colleagues, participants also explained that they felt more comfortable confronting colleagues about discrimination, as opposed to faculty. When Participant 7 brought a racist statement to a colleague's attention, Participant 7 found that the colleague did not realize the statement s/he made was racist. This created a learning opportunity for both this participant and the colleague.

Participant 6, however, had a somewhat different experience. Participant 6 confronted a colleague over something discriminatory, and Participant 6 described how the colleague responded by trying to turn the situation into a joke and was "stammering and stuttering." Participant 6 reported that in this situation, she "let [my colleague] off the hook," but stated, "With my colleagues, I'm more prone to just make them own it." Participant 8 was more inclined to confront a colleague as well.

Three participants stated they did not experience from colleagues. Rather, these participants felt more discrimination from university faculty. "I didn't experience any discrimination from any of my colleagues," said Participant 5, and Participant 7 said, "Well, I didn't really experience any discrimination from colleagues. I experienced it more with faculty, you know, instructors, professors, and chairs."

**Subtheme 2c: Discrimination based on assumptions.** Discrimination toward research participants was enacted by participants' faculty and colleagues, but I created this as a distinct subtheme because the ways in which this discrimination occurred was different from the discrimination that I described in Subthemes 2A and 2B. This type of discrimination was based on assumptions made about participants based on their names and photographs posted in the online classroom, and by information that participants

disclosed in online classroom discussions. Half of participants (4 of 8) shared experiences of discrimination in the online classroom. These experiences arose most frequently in online discussion forums. Participant 2 described being discriminated against by a professor in the online classroom after this participant disclosed that he happened to be gay. According to Participant 2, this discrimination was not racially based, but was enacted due to his sexual orientation. "During the classroom discussions with that one professor who I felt acted a bit indifferent toward me, I felt like he judged me once he knew that I was gay," Participant 2 said, "I went into this self-directed mode where I was teaching myself…I found myself not wanting to ask him, or anyone else, for that matter, questions." Eventually, Participant 2 no longer wanted to read this professor's feedback, because discerning whether the feedback "was coming from a place of sincerity or from a place of judgment" was too difficult.

Other participants believed the discrimination they experienced was due to skin color. Participant 6 shared:

My name is not an unusual name, but it is a common name people will assume that it is a man's name. The first time I went on the chat…to introduce myself, I purposely did not say that I was an African American female, I did not put that I live [in the city I live], in the event that people would associate that with my ethnicity, which is African American. I didn't want to be judged…many of my classmates thought I was a white male and I believe that when they responded to my discussion, they responded with that thought…I had one professor that, in my first couple of classes, he asked me if I wanted him to be my chair for my

dissertation…I knew that he was important enough that I wanted him to be on my

team…I met him at my first residency and when I came into the room and he

looked at my tag, because I knew who he was, um, it was a very cold greeting.

Certainly not a greeting from someone who offered to be my mentor…I

sometimes feel that people feel betrayed once they see the package that they have

interacted with.

Participant 8 described a comparable situation. This participant began a class

without putting her profile picture up in the online classroom, noting that "I have a

common name that is not ethnicity-specific, you know, like any female could have it."

During this course, Participant 8 observed receiving comments on her posts "in a timely

fashion" and, when emailing the professor, "I would get feedback within 2-3 days." Yet

when Participant 8 posted her picture in the classroom, "that all changed." Participant 8

explained:

It felt like as soon as the instructor saw my face, he changed…his attitude

changed toward me. And I know he did because he would respond to my posts all

late and all, and that's if he even responded at all. I couldn't help but feel some

kind of way and it just confirmed the way I felt because I started to notice that he

responded more to the white girls.

In answer to RQ2, African American students perceive discrimination from

professors, academic chairs, and colleagues as stressors toward earning doctoral degrees.

The perceived discrimination that academic chairs and URR reviewers, those individuals

in positions of power, enacted against participants created stress while working toward

doctoral degrees. Participants felt that these academic gatekeepers questioned research topics and study populations to the extent that the participants in my study felt they were held back because of the time required to justify their research studies. Participants in the present study believed that discriminating against the research topic and study populations were indirect ways of discriminating against the participants themselves, and the participants attributed this to race-based discrimination.

Perceived discrimination based on assumptions individuals made about participants was another factor that participants said presented stress while pursuing their doctoral degrees. When participants posted their pictures in the online classroom, such that colleagues and professors could attach an image to their name, participants reported that the level of engagement with their discussion posts dropped. These participants attributed this to race, because this was perhaps the most obvious feature visible from their photographs. However, some participants also felt that they received greater questioning from faculty in classroom discussions when sharing their experiences as African American students. One participant also noted this after disclosing he happened to be homosexual.

Finally, and though not felt by all participants, three participants felt stress from discrimination by their colleagues. In two cases, this discrimination was worse than the discrimination from faculty. While participants were not necessarily comfortable addressing discrimination from faculty, these participants did explain that they would be more likely to address discrimination they felt from colleagues, which may have been because of the lack of power differential in the relationship. As Participant 6 highlighted,

"When it was the colleagues you felt more empowered to approach them and address it right then and there…When someone is assessing you, you don't want to have that tug-of-war because you already feel like you're at a disadvantage."

**Theme 3: Alleviating Discrimination in Online Education**

Theme 3 partially addressed RQ3: What strategies do African American students utilize to assist in coping with discrimination issues of online education? While this theme does not directly explore how participants mitigated stress in their lives, as Theme 4 does, all participants had ideas for ways to address discrimination in online education overall. This, in turn, would alleviate stress on a structural and systemic level and could help African American students enrolled in online doctoral degree programs overall. I did not identify any discernible subthemes within this theme.

Participants 4 and 8 observed that because "discrimination is nothing new" (Participant 4) and "American was built on racism" (Participant 8), addressing discrimination was something that could not be accomplished only at the level of education. These two participants shared the opinion that addressing discrimination in online education would be a nearly impossible task. This was because they believe the larger structures in society have done little to address discrimination, and those with power in online education have merely followed this model. In order to truly change discrimination in education, these two participants thought society as a whole would have to change.

Though Participant 4 and Participant 8 appeared pessimistic about the ability to alleviate discrimination in education, they did have suggestions for improvement. Six

participants, including 4 and 8, described how hiring more faculty and staff of color would benefit students of color. Participant 4 stated:

I would recommend to administration and faculty to hire more of a diverse faculty. Because when I go in and wish to speak to someone in regards to being discriminated against, I would rather speak with a faculty member that understands my feelings and knows what I am going through, simply because they are of color and know what it feels like to be discriminated against. I don't want to go in and speak with someone not of color and be judged, like, "Oh, here they go again, another one complaining." We need diversity in administration and faculty, individuals who possess the same power of authority to get a job done as their white colleagues have. You know, diverse individuals whose jobs won't be threatened because they took a stand.

In addition to feeling like more faculty of color would have more power, Participant 6 thought it equally important to have representation within the faculty. Participant 6 stated that she had never had a black professor in her doctoral journey and thought "if we diversity the faculty and support staff, that can go a long way." Participant 6 explained that the university needed "more diversity all the way around."

Participants 5, 7, and 8 made connections between having a more diverse faculty and improved mentorship. "We need to match those students [of color] with the diverse faculty that can better relate to the issues concerning them," reported Participant 5. This could be one way to alleviate the research topic discrimination that participant spoke of in their interviews. A more diverse faculty could be more attuned to the unique research

concerns students of color propose and could be better situated to help those doctoral students against roadblocks. Participants 7 and 8 believed improved faculty diversity would translate to improved mentoring of African American students. Participant 7 noted a "lack of faculty of my own race. Lack of mentorship with faculty of my own race and gender, and lack of student support in regard to dealing with racial disparities." Participant 8 noted, "I never had anyone who looked like me" in a mentorship role. Both Participant 7 and Participant 8 thought improving faculty diversity was important for building strong relationships between professors or chairs and doctoral students, a rapport these participants felt was missing currently.

Two participants wanted to see greater diversity training opportunities for faculty and staff. "Universities should implement some type of forum pertaining to diversity for students of color and this forum should cover issues that pertain to the different types of discrimination, prejudices, biases…things of that nature," Participant 2 declared. This participant likened such a training to sexual harassment training, which is already a mandatory training. If faculty were better trained in diversity, Participant 2 felt students would know who they could turn to if they were discriminated against. Similarly, Participant 7 recommended multicultural symposiums as a way to address discrimination and foster discussion of diversity-related topics between faculty and students.

Participants 2 and 6 thought more support should be available to students of color. "I feel that something should be set up in place for when students are going through no matter what it is, whether its discrimination, health issues, concerns about education…things like that," said Participant 2. This participant believed greater

university support systems would help alleviate the feelings of loneliness and isolation that online students report. Participant 6 viewed this support in terms of availability of materials. Participant 6 wanted to see more use of books written by persons of color used in online classes, and a library database for black studies, both of which would help students of color feel greater representation in school.

Though African American students do not directly utilize the strategies that participants shared for coping with discrimination in online education, they did believe that if universities incorporated these suggestions, African American students would benefit. Participants overwhelmingly wanted to see greater representation and diversity of university faculty and staff. This was important to participants because they wanted to feel represented by diversity faculty. Participants also felt like diverse faculty would provide better mentorship, in part because diverse faculty should have a better understanding of the concerns that African American students or students of color possess. In addition to hiring more faculty of color, participants believed faculty would benefit from diversity training. Greater support systems for students of color would also help students feel more welcome in online doctoral programs.

**Theme 4: Managing Stress and Discrimination**

Theme 4 partially addressed the third RQ, which asked: What strategies do African American students utilize to assist in coping with discrimination issues of online education. Participants described self-care in many forms to cope with discrimination. Participants 2, 4, and 8 found solace in exercise and going to the gym, while Participant 5 used positive affirmations. Participant 7 attended counseling sessions. Participants leaned

on support systems of family and friends and turned to their faith to help them overcome stress resulting from discrimination. Participants were also motivated by discrimination using this to dive deeper into their studies and push themselves to do better. Based on the relationships between participants' statements, I created three subthemes that supported the creation of this theme: support system of family and friends, turning stress into motivation, and relying on faith to manage stress.

**Subtheme 4a: Support system of family and friends.** Seven participants described the helpful support systems they leaned on to help them overcome the stress of discrimination. In two cases, Participant 4 and Participant 6, using the perseverance they learned from their family helped them get through tough times in school. For other participants, this support team of family and friends included colleagues from school and even academic mentors. This was true for Participant 1, who explained that her second committee member is a man who happens to be gay, and "he has always been in my corner, and you know, he has his own experience of being a minority." Participant 1 thought this meant the second committee member was better able to understand her, so she leaned on this person as a form of support. Participants 6 and 7 also reported bonding with other students of color in the classroom. Participant 7 also turned to faculty mentors for support. Participant 7 elaborated:

> If, by chance, when there were other Black students in the classroom, we
> immediately bonded with one another, and we would have these conversations of
> our experiences and usually it was the same. Nine out of 10 it was the same.

Maybe one discrepancy or they experienced something different that I didn't or, you know, vice-versa.

Participant 4 recognized the importance of reaching out to others during stressful times, as did other participants. For Participant 4, though, this was challenging. "During this time, I had to reach out to others, something that I am not good at because I tend to keep my problems to myself," said Participant 4. In contrast, Participant 5 had to talk to family and friends "to make me feel stable, like I was not losing my mind." Doing this helped Participant 5 feel like, "hey, maybe this isn't about me, maybe it's about exposing the truth to others."

Participant 8 leaned heavily on family and friends and an old university mentor. After feeling discriminated against because of her dissertation topic, Participant 8 shared turning to an old professor:

> I went to visit one of my professors at the college I attended…I told her what was going on, and so I explained to her what my topic is and what my research was about. And so she said that just listening to what I was saying in regards to what my study was about that she really didn't find anything wrong with my dissertation or my dissertation topic…She was the one who told me to stand firm and not give in, because the information I had thus far was good information that other studies can expand on…My family, friends, and some colleagues, and a former professor gave me a lot of support, especially through the tough and trying times, you know?

**Subtheme 4b: Turning stress into motivation.** Three participants shared that they channeled the stress of discrimination into motivation. In conjunction with other self-care methods, like turning to friends and family or going to the gym or meditating, participants used the stress to propel them forward. For Participant 6, this experience was almost spiritual: "Every time that I encountered something that I perceived as racist…I was sure I was where I was supposed to be and entering a field because I as clear that there needs to be more people…that represent a community."

Participant 3 drew on inner strength to provide motivation. Participant 3 stated:

Because I am a strong person, it made me stronger and wanna fight back harder and prove to those who I felt were discriminating against me that I have much more intelligence and I will use my education and my degrees to show them that I am beyond that, because I will not and cannot discriminate against anyone of any race, creed, or religion. I come from a background where there is a multitude and I feel that this profession needs more people like myself.

The experience of discrimination was harder on Participant 8. This participant had to take time to process the discrimination and stress that she felt before channeling this into something constructive. "I had to sit back for a while and pick myself up by the loins," said Participant 8, "It made me work harder not only to prove myself to them, but also to myself."

**Subtheme 4c: Relying on faith to manage stress.** More than other strategies used to cope with discrimination, participants leaned heavily on their faith, which participants attributed to their culture. As Participant 1 said, "The other piece of it

culturally for me is the…just my belief system and my belief structure is I am whole-heartedly a follower of Christ." Participant 1 used prayer to help her cope with discrimination, as did Participant 7. Participant 1 believed that everything that happened to her as a doctoral student was in the hands of God, the spiritual being whom she believed in. Participant 1 described, "[God] told me from the beginning that this is what He wanted me to do, and I didn't, you know, I didn't." Similarly, Participant 2 stated, "A cultural factor was my faith. I have to lean on my faith."

Participant 4 turned to faith by reaching out to her church family. Participant 8 did the same. Participant 8 described reaching out to her "prayer warriors," those friends who she knew she could count on to pray for her. Further, Participant 8 said staying in contact with these prayers was important. "I make sure that I stay in contact with them to this day, at least once a week. I need them, they need me, we need each other," reported Participant 8. Additionally, Participant 2 recalled, "Picking up the phone and calling my friends and family members who were strong in their faith and telling them what I was going through." Doing this was a challenge for Participant 2 because, as a man, "it was hard for me to be a man and say that I need some help."

Participants used many strategies of self-care to help them cope with discrimination issues in online education. Many participants reported using a combination of self-care activities, including leaning on friends and family and drawing on their faith to get through. Other participants tried to turn the negative experiences of discrimination into positive situations by using this to provide them with motivation to do their best at school.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the findings from this research study. These findings indicated that the experience of stress related to discrimination in an online doctoral program is characterized by emotions like sadness, anger, frustration, and depression. All participants described the intense emotions they felt surrounding discrimination, and the impacts of these emotions on mental health. Participants experienced self-doubt which caused them to consider dropping out, and in one case, depression leading to suicidal thoughts. This discrimination came mostly from professors, academic chairs, and URR (dissertation quality assurance) reviewers and, in some cases, other colleagues. Participants felt discriminated against based on their dissertation topics, which participants attributed to indirect discrimination based on skin color.

To cope with discrimination in online education, participants proposed a number of ways that online universities could assist students of color. These ideas included better and mandatory training on diversity and hiring more diverse faculty. Providing students of color with better faculty representation and also more support would go a long way to assist students of color if they experience discrimination. On an individual level, participants used self-care strategies to cope with discrimination. Participants described turning to their social networks and drawing on their faith to help them cope. Some participants used discrimination to motivate them to finish their degrees. In the next chapter, I consider these findings in relation to the literature.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

**Introduction**

The purpose of this generic qualitative research study was to explore the experiences of stress related to discrimination among African American students who are participating in online doctoral programs. This study was exploratory in nature, and I explored how African American students in online doctoral programs interpreted their experiences of stress regarding discrimination. In Chapter 4, I reported qualitative findings from participant interviews. In Chapter 5, I interpret these findings and discuss limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, implications of this study, and conclusions of the study.

I examined the discriminatory factors African American doctoral students perceived as stressors toward earning their degree and the strategies they used to help them overcome and cope with stressors related to discrimination in online education. My goals for this study were (a) to explore the perceptions of African American doctoral students regarding discrimination in their online education and (b) to gain and provide an understanding of the stress related to discrimination among this student population and add to existing research on discrimination experiences of African American doctoral students. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) indicated that generic qualitative studies are utilized when researchers are interested in understanding the meaning behind the phenomenon that has taken place.

Previous studies showed that racism, stereotyping, prejudice, and other stressors, such as isolation and disconnection from peers and faculty, were found to contribute to

the discrimination and stress experienced among African American students (Baker &

Moore, 2015; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2014). This was reported by the

participants in the present study as well. The findings from the present study revealed that

all participants reported experiencing stress and discrimination at the online university

they attend. Researchers have found, however, that student isolation is generally related

to online education delivery, regardless of race (Bowers & Kumar, 2015; Lai, 2015). I did

not design the present study to distinguish between student isolation based on perceived

racial discrimination and isolation based on online education delivery in general.

Recommendations for further research in this area are made later in the chapter.

All participants in this study reported that perceived discrimination came mostly

from members of the faculty (i.e., instructors, chairs, and research reviewers), and, in

some cases, colleagues. Participants reported that they were discriminated against based

on their dissertation topics and the marginalized groups being studied, which they

attributed to indirect discrimination based on skin color. Seven participants reported

negative experiences and a lack of rapport with instructors and/or dissertation committee

chairs. Participants reported that support from family and friends as well as relying on

their faith provided them with the emotional stability needed to cope and persevere

towards earning their doctoral degree.

### Interpretation of the Findings

The results of this study revealed that perceived discrimination was a significant

factor of stress for African American online doctoral students. The findings also indicated

that all students encounter common stressors related to academics, personal and

professional responsibilities, finances, etc., whether they attend school on campus or online. However, for African American students, they not only encounter the aforementioned common stressors, but they also encounter stressors related to their culture and/or racial ethnicity.

In my search for relevant literature, I found few articles related to the discrimination experiences of African American doctoral students in online programs. Conway and Bethune (2015) examined the relationship between the hidden attitudes and implicit biases of online instructors regarding the ethnically identifiable first names of their students and found a relationship between implicit bias and student names. Conway and Bethune also found that instructors demonstrated stronger implicit bias against African American names and weaker implicit bias against Latino names in comparison to White names. The findings from the present study of African American students' experiences of discrimination in online education support and extend the findings of Conaway and Bethune.

The findings of the present study also indicated why some students felt the need to conceal their identity. For instance, Participant 6 stated that her name is a common name and that most people would assume that it is a White person's name. For this reason, in the online classroom, she did not want to reveal her gender or ethnicity for fear of being discriminated against or judged by her colleagues and professors. Participant 8 stated that her instructor changed toward her after she posted a profile picture of herself. Prior to that, neither her colleagues nor her instructor knew of her ethnicity, nor could she be identified through her common name. However, once her picture was posted, her

relationship with her professor became strained. This, she felt, was due to the

assumptions made by her professor about her ethnicity. These findings also confirmed

those from prior research, wherein participants reported experiencing bias and

stereotyping from administration, faculty, colleagues, and instructors (Baker & Moore,

2015; McGee, 2016). Peterson, Van Dam, and Wheeler (2009) noted that instructors are

inclined to form assumptions about students that can have harmful outcomes on their

educational experiences, and first names may prompt instructors to downgrade a student

to a specific ethnic or racial class, which can be inequitably used to form additional

assumptions about students based on stereotypes instead of abilities. Consequently, there

is a need for online instructors to acknowledge and address any bias based on

stereotypical name recognition to encourage equity and impartiality in assessment and in

student-instructor relationships (Peterson et al.).

Confirming existing literature, participants in the present study shared reports of

negative experiences of stress from discrimination in online education and how it

impacted them both mentally and physically. The participants in this study described how

discrimination from instructors, dissertation chairs, and other faculty members left them

with feelings of frustration, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. For instance,

Participant 7 contemplated suicide because of the negative experiences and lack of

rapport with her dissertation chair. Participant 5 considered dropping out of school

because of the lack of communication he experienced with his committee chair. All

participants reported feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, and lack of self-confidence that

was induced by the perceived discrimination from faculty and/or academic chairs. These

findings confirm those of prior researchers on the multiple dimensions of stress. As noted by Rosiek et al. (2016), stress makes individuals more susceptible to mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. According to Holinka (2015), stress can also negatively affect individuals' emotions and how they feel about themselves, undercutting self-esteem and confidence.

The findings of the present study suggest a lack of communication and understanding between participants and instructors, whether it is in the online classroom or during the dissertation process. The lack of communication was frustrating for the participants. They felt that the academic chairs, instructors, and other faculty members demonstrated bias and lack of cultural understanding. Because of this, the participants believed that they were treated unfairly and inequitably. Information from the study indicates that the university should find new approaches and/or procedures, independent of residencies, to help African American doctoral students establish higher-quality relationships with faculty members to enhance educational outcomes for students of color. As suggested by the participants in the study, this could be established by hiring more faculty members from diverse ethnicities, backgrounds, and cultures to provide students of color with adequate support, should discrimination be encountered. Participants stated that they would like to see faculty with similar backgrounds to their own to provide role models for the university's changing demographics. These findings confirmed prior research that online ethnic minority students felt they experienced limited to no support from their online instructors and that because of this; their education

was negatively impacted as was their ability to communicate with their instructors (Yeboah & Smith, 2016).

To cope with discriminatory stressors that are not effectively addressed by educational institutions, African American students seek their own support and ways to help buffer the effects of stress from discrimination (Odafe et al., 2017) as well as ways to help them achieve their academic goals (Bently-Edwards et al., 2018). The findings of the present study confirm those of previous research in this area. Participants from the present study believed the university did not effectively establish ways to connect them with proper resources to support them and assist in coping with stressors from discrimination. Because of the lack of support from the university, participants sought their own support from family, friends, and colleagues and relied heavily on their faith to cope with the challenges of perceived discrimination.

## Conceptual Framework

The findings from this study were consistent with the cognitive appraisal conceptual framework. Cognitive appraisal theory holds that when individuals are provided with adequate resources, they will encounter fewer negative results from the stressor in relation to individuals considered less capable of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to Lazarus and Folkman, cognitive appraisal includes two stages: (a) primary appraisal, and (b) secondary appraisal.

Primary appraisal involves the individual's assessment of an occurrence or a circumstance as a possible danger or risk to the individual's welfare (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). During the primary appraisal stage, all participants from this study felt that stress

from discrimination was harmful and believed that it negatively impacted their overall health, well-being, and education. The participants reported they did not receive guidance or support from the institution's administration and/or faculty. Because of this, they were left with feelings of anger, frustration, loneliness, isolation, hopelessness, and depression. In addition, participants reported feelings of self-doubt, lack of self-confidence, and wanting to quit or withdraw from the university.

Secondary appraisal involves the individual's assessment of his or her capacity to manage the occurrence or circumstance (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Cognitive appraisal theory focuses attention on the interaction between the internal elements of an individual and external stimulus (Lazarus & Folkman). An external occurrence gives rise to physiological responses in the body that surpasses an individual's ability to manage stress (Lazarus & Folkman). Because the participants reported that support was not forthcoming from the university's faculty and administration, the participants stated they had to discover ways to alleviate and manage stress on their own. They also discovered ways to transform negative emotions into positive motivations through self-care and social support. All participants sought social support from family, friends, mentors, and other colleagues as well as relied on faith to help alleviate stress and to help ensure they did not withdraw.

Cognitive appraisal theory suggests that individuals differ in the coping strategies they utilize to manage stress and that coping strategies affect the impact of stress on physical and psychological outcomes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1985). An important aspect of cognitive appraisal theory is to understand that all individuals respond to stress

differently and how they respond to stress determines the outcome of their response (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Every participant in this study seemed to have instinctively used the cognitive appraisal framework. Each participant evaluated stress from discrimination as harmful to their overall health and education, and they interpreted particular aspects of the stress to determine how the stressor can be managed (e.g., sufficient support and resources available to them). How they evaluated the stress determined how they responded.

## Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to African American students who participate in online doctoral programs at a major university. I did not consider the viewpoints of other students of other marginalized groups, only those selected for this study. I conducted this study using a computer program known as Skype, so I was not able to meet with the participants physically and had to depend on the way they presented themselves online. I conducted this study by examining one group at a single location (i.e., an online university) and did not contemplate the use of other universities. Using students of diverse ethnicities might have resulted in different findings; however, the population for this study supplied the data originally desired, which was the experiences of discrimination among African American doctoral students in online education. Additionally, conducting the study at a single location limits the generalizability of the results. Another limitation was that I did not measure or confirm issues related to discrimination but rather focused on the subjective reports of students and their perceptions of discrimination.

**Recommendations**

One recommendation for future research would be to conduct a similar study using students of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds across multiple academic institutions. The information gathered from this study provided the perspectives of African American students only. If a future study contained students of diverse ethnicities, it could provide additional information advantageous for universities to enhance academic outcomes for students of color.

Future researchers could examine the experiences of online African American students at undergraduate levels. In this study, I focused solely on graduate-level doctoral students. Data gathered from a study on undergraduates and/or masters-level students at the same institution might yield information about discrimination encountered at these levels. In addition, further research on discrimination could support efforts toward student retention for educational institutions providing online undergraduate level degrees.

Studies should also be conducted on communication (i.e., frequency of contact and communication type) among students as well as between students and committee members and chairs. Participants in the study suggested that communication was lacking among students, instructors, and other faculty within the classroom setting and during the dissertation phase. The findings from this study suggest that the participants believed additional communication opportunities would enhance rapport and build better student-instructor relationships to improve the quality of communication.

The participants expressed the need for more diverse faculty members and administration. These individuals would possess the same power of authority and equal rights as their White peers, and their jobs would not be at risk if their concerns of discrimination against students were voiced. I recommend African American students and other students of diverse ethnicities be included in the decision-making process when policies are being formed. This might help ensure that the voices of diverse students are being heard. African American students can provide policymaker's examples of actual discrimination experiences encountered in online programs. Further research is recommended on how to effectively evaluate diversity training for faculty members and whether the training is meeting stated objectives. Research is also recommended on whether and how teachers enact this training.

Quantitative studies are also recommended to augment the subjective reports of students and more objectively identify and measure discrimination in online graduate education. To gain a broader view of discrimination in online higher education, it is recommended that the views of faculty members and administrators be considered, collected, and analyzed. Additionally, because student isolation is generally found in online education delivery, research is recommended on distinguishing isolation based on the online format from isolation based on discrimination.

African American doctoral students desire and need support when dealing with racial disparities in online education. Seeking ways to appropriately provide this support could make a difference in the lives of students, faculty, and academic administrators. Providing support could benefit educational institutions by building stronger student-

faculty relationships to ensure student success and by encouraging faculty to become aware of biases and cultural insensitivities toward individuals of diverse ethnicities.

## Implications

Findings from this study have several implications for social change. Regarding policy, African American students could be an asset in the development of new policies that can have a positive impact on their educational experiences. Policymakers could allow African American students to be the force of motivation for developing new policies because they are marginalized on both educational and social levels. The results of this study can inform universities, stakeholders, and other policymakers about the importance of addressing issues of discrimination that can negatively impact the academic and overall health of African American students. Policymakers could establish policies with better reforms and initiatives to enhance equity for African American online doctoral students by providing more resources and the support necessary to make them feel connected to the educational institution, administration, and faculty.

Other implications for positive social change derived from this study are that being more attentive to the voices of African American students, having conversations about their struggles, and acknowledging their viewpoints and outlook on discrimination could not only empower them to become more successful in managing stress from discrimination in education but also help to empower them in their personal and professional lives. Participant 1 reported that issues pertaining to discrimination and diversity can be resolved in online education by engaging in conversations about it, whether it's in a discussion forum or at residency. Participant 7 stated, "Making these

issues and these concerns a point of awareness for our professors, for our organizations, I think it's important that we as women of color; as people of color be active participants in the professional organizations." If they are given a voice to discuss their experiences and the experiences they would like to have in their online education, African American students in higher education could have a better opportunity to receive the support needed to positively alter their education experience.

Study participants expressed their gratitude for having the opportunity to discuss their experiences of discrimination encountered within their online program of study. Participant 6 reported that this information will allow others to better understand how discrimination affects African American students whether they attend school on campus or online. Participant 5 reported how grateful he was just to be able to discuss some of the things that were bothersome to him. Participant 4 stated, "I enjoyed discussing my experiences with you and hopefully this will shed light on the discrimination practices that are going on in online education because it just doesn't happen only on campus, it happens online too." Collectively, all participants were eager to share their experiences of discrimination encountered in online education.

Cognitive appraisal was the conceptual framework used to guide this study (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Cognitive appraisal was used to determine how the participants appraised their experiences of stress from discrimination and to determine how they viewed their options and resources to help cope with stress. As mentioned, during the primary stage of cognitive appraisal, all participants appraised their experiences of stress as being harmful to their overall health and education. During the

secondary stage, the participants reported that support and resources available were limited to none. This led to an increase in stress levels, which had a negative impact their health and education.

The findings of the study aligned with the conceptual framework of cognitive appraisal theory. Despite the negative experiences each participant shared, they continued to flourish because each participant consciously and deliberately tried to convert negative experiences into positive motivation to persist and achieve their academic goal of earning their doctoral degree. For example, to remain motivated and buffer the effects of stress, all participants sought support from outside resources when support was not provided by the university. The conceptual framework was appropriate for the study because although the participants were not consciously aware of the concepts of cognitive appraisal, the concepts were applied when they sought outside support to restore balance to their overall health when they were exposed to the risks of stress. Despite being consciously unaware of applying of cognitive appraisal, their descriptions of the strategies they used to manage and cope with stress demonstrated the effectiveness of cognitive appraisal. By obtaining outside support, all participants were able to create favorable outcomes by focusing on ways to turn negative events into positive motivation to increase their chances of success in online education and to achieve their academic goals.

## Conclusion

Based on the results of the present study, African American doctoral students participating in online education experienced various stressors related to discrimination such as racial bias, discrimination toward sexual orientation, and racial ethnicity.

Participants reported that discrimination came from faculty, administration, and sometimes colleagues. It is apparent that the participants felt there is a lack of diversity in faculty and administration and a lack of communication between African American students and faculty. Lack in both these areas is what the participants felt led to misunderstandings of who they are as a people and their culture, which in turn created anxiety and heightened stress levels. African American doctoral students' voices need to be heard not only to assist with providing the necessary support needed but also to provide a genuine understanding of the discrimination experiences they perceive as encountering in online education. Evidence revealed that communication between students and faculty was lacking as suggested by participants, thus, limiting faculty's understanding of how African American doctoral students perceived discrimination.

The lack of communication and understanding that occurred among the participants supports the university's mandatory cultural sensitivity workshops and forums that pertain to diversity for faculty members and administration. It may be, however, that regular evaluation of diversity training, review of training content, and examination of whether the training is meeting stated objectives are needed. Such activities might help to improve communication between African American students and faculty and assist faculty and administration in becoming aware of their own assumptions, biases, and preconceived notions towards students of diverse ethnicities and cultures.

Prior to this study, little research had been conducted on the discrimination experiences of African American doctoral students participating in online education. I

addressed this gap in research by exploring student perceptions of discriminatory experiences and the stressors that African American doctoral students encounter within the online educational format. Data gathered from African American doctoral students supplied information that identified themes and patterns associated with their experiences of perceived discrimination, which can help faculty and administration understand how African American doctoral students feel about discrimination in online education and encourage changes in diversifying the doctoral field of study. Information obtained from this study might provide a means for educational institutions to improve communication between students and faculty, especially students of diverse ethnicities. Each participant wanted to express their experiences and provide answers to the questions presented in this study. All participants were granted the opportunity to discuss their experiences and other issues of concern through the Skype interview sessions. The participants provided feedback to not only help improve online education for African American doctoral students but also to positively enhance their educational experiences. It is critical that African American students completing a doctoral program establish rapport with instructors, colleagues, and the educational institution to build stronger relations and connections.

In sum, the findings from this study supported findings of prior research on discrimination encountered in online education. Additional research is needed to more quantitatively identify, and measure discrimination perceived by African American doctoral students. However, this study adds to the scarce research on the topic and

provides a foundation for future researchers to address and expand on the issues of

discrimination encountered in online education.

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Appendix

**Interview Protocol**

Before I begin each interview session, I will welcome the participant and explain that the information provided during the interview session will be confidential. I will use probes and follow up questions to explore the key concepts of interview questions being asked.  Interview questions:

1. Describe your experience of discrimination, if any, encountered in online education.

2. If you experienced discrimination, how did this experience make you feel?

3. If you experienced discrimination, who did this discrimination come from?

4. If you experienced discrimination, how would you compare your experience of discrimination with colleagues as opposed to instructors or other staff? Please elaborate.

5. From your experience, or lack of experience, has your gender or ethnicity played a role in how you were treated by others? Do you believe this affected your ability to interact with colleagues and instructors within the online classroom? How did this make you feel?

6. What factors if any, created barriers to your online education advancement experiences? Would you share some examples?

7. What factors whether personal or cultural do you feel are significant in helping you earn your doctoral degree? Would you share some examples?

8. Discrimination can either negatively or positively affect a students' motivation to persevere; if you experienced discrimination, did you use any strategies to overcome this? What strategies did you use?

9. Do you believe that discrimination issues and issues pertaining to diversity can be resolved in online education? How do you think such issues can be addressed?

10. What solutions would you recommend to administration and faculty to help African American students flourish at both traditional and online institutions of higher education?

11. Would you like to share anything else about your experiences?

Before I conclude with this interview, I would like to thank you again for participating in this interview session and sharing your experiences with me. As a reminder, my contact information is on your copy of the signed consent form should you have any questions after this interview.