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# School Success Among African American Male Adolescents: An Existential Examination of Protective Factors

Carol Thomas

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SCHOOL SUCCESS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ADOLESCENTS: AN  
EXISTENTIAL EXAMINATION OF PROTECTIVE FACTORS

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Counseling, Psychology, and Special Education

School of Education

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SCHOOL SUCCESS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ADOLESCENTS: AN  
EXISTENTIAL EXAMINATION OF PROTECTIVE FACTORS

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## Abstract

For many adolescents who live in a high-risk neighborhood, harsh and sometimes dangerous circumstances often interfere with the ability to enjoy school success. While quantitative methods have been employed to reveal protective factors among African American male adolescents, few qualitative studies exist that analyze the lived experiences of this population of youth and their ability to flourish despite environmental disadvantages. This study is a phenomenologically-oriented narrative case study of five African American male adolescents who attend high school in a small, rural community and who are on track to graduate. The primary philosophies that framed this study were Ryan and Deci's (2006) theory of self-determination and Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 2005) bioecological model of human development. Data was derived from a demographic survey, co-researchers' responses to a semi-structured interview guide during in-depth individual interviews, and personal observations and interactions. The following findings emerged as protective factors among the five adolescents interviewed: satisfaction of needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness), opportunities for meaningful participation, strong connection with at least one adult, and meaningful friendships. In light of these findings, school counselors, teachers, administrators, and policy makers can advance the cause of students who live in high-risk neighborhoods by promoting and implementing programs and activities that support and encourage these types of protective factors within the school environment.

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*“Now this calf has grown to be a bull with horns, able to protect himself from others . . .  
Now, here I am this day, with my accomplishments, reflecting on my years . . . Yes, the  
gusty winds of my melancholy youth have shifted, and brought to me a fine sunny day.  
I’m thankful, fortunate to have found some peace in my lifetime.”*

*Antwone Quenton Fisher*

*“Finding Fish,” 2002*

## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM

#### Introduction

Adolescence is a tumultuous time of life, when individuals are caught somewhere between childhood and adulthood. G. Stanley Hall (1904), one of the first to give early direction to the development of psychology in the United States and to deem adolescence a particular scientific concern, described adolescence as a period when an individual reenacts humanity's passage from savagery to civilization. Erik Erikson (1950, 1959) described adolescence as a time in which an inherited maturational ground plan resulted in the inescapable psychosocial crisis of identity versus role confusion, and Anna Freud (1969) viewed adolescence as a biologically based and universal developmental disturbance that was "an interruption of peaceful growth."

Physical and psychological changes, emotional and social development, and struggles towards autonomy can all increase the difficulties experienced by adolescents trying to find their places in the world. When detriments such as emotional rejection or abuse, low family cohesion, poverty, abandonment, dilapidated and unsafe neighborhoods, parental criminality, mental health issues, or substance use are factored in, adolescents' competent development into adulthood is truly remarkable. Compounding the labyrinthine transition faced by all adolescents are the unique challenges that confront the population of African American male adolescents. In addition to the typical developmental struggles experienced while making the transition from childhood to adulthood, social, educational, and cultural impediments often forestall success in this minority population.

The impediments that seemingly would make it impossible for African American male adolescents to resist becoming a part of a rising number of negative academic and social statistics are vast. Yet, despite numerous discouraging social conditions and academic obstructions, most African American youth mature into well-functioning and productive adults (Anderson, Eaddy, & Williams, 1990). The literature hints that culturally-relevant factors or dynamics such as racial identity and racial socialization may contribute to the resiliency experienced by some urban African American adolescents (Peters, 1985; Stevenson, 1994, 1995). Slaby (1997) posits that an “immune system” exists in some youth in the form of patterns of thought and action that protect against the effects of exposure to negative social experience and enable “substantial psychological resilience” (p. 174). Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory supports this notion. The research, however, fails to provide definitive knowledge.

The principal question for this inquiry, therefore, is: What protective factors exist in the lives of certain African American male adolescents that facilitate or support their school success when they reside in a high-risk neighborhood? A qualitative approach has been implemented to respond to this question in a thoughtful and purposeful way in an attempt to shed light on the lived experiences of adolescents defined as successful in this context.

### Background of the Problem

Statistical projections regarding African American males are grim. They are overrepresented in the criminal justice system (Bailey, 1995; Education Trust, 1996, 1998). Studies report that one out of every four African American males is in jail or under supervision by the court systems (Bass & Coleman, 1997; Green & Wright, 1992).



According to Guyer (1992), homicide is the leading cause of death among 15 to 19 year old African American males and occurs at a rate nine times higher than for same-aged Caucasian male youth (Guyer cited by DuRant, Pendergrast, & Cadenhead, 1994). In 1992, the juvenile murder arrest rate for African American males was 7.5 times that of White males (U.S. Department of Justice, 1993). With regard to African American males, statistical projections concerning educational trends, cultural factors, and community violence are equally dismal.

### *Educational Trends*

Within the educational system, the outlook for African American males is equally bleak. Smith (2004) found that, although African American males made up only 8.6 percent of enrollment in public schools in the 2000-2001 school year, they represented 22 percent of expulsions and 23 percent of suspensions, vastly outnumbering the expulsion and suspension rates of Caucasian male adolescents (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000). African American male adolescents are placed in special education or remedial classrooms at a rate three times higher than Caucasian male adolescents (Advancement Project/Civil Rights Project, 2000; Allen-Meares, 1999; Lee, 1996; Trescott, 1990).

In their study of gender bias and race in the punishment of school children, McFadden, Marsh, Price, and Hwang (1992) reported that, even though African American students accounted for only 36.7% of the disciplinary referrals at the school under study, these students received 54.1% of the corporeal punishment and 43.9% of the school suspensions. When McFadden, et al. investigated whether the severity of the acts perpetrated by African American students was the reason they received more punishment, they found no disciplinary records supporting such a claim. Making African American

students the primary focus of anti-violence policies in schools obscures the institutional and organizational factors that contribute to school violence (Hyman & Perone, 1998). McFadden, et al. assert that “the more autocratic and punishing the school environment, the more all children, but particularly minority and poor children, are likely to be alienated from the learning environment” (p. 145). These researchers urge school systems to develop more humane and effective methods of controlling students so that schools can discontinue the practice of spending an inordinate and ultimately self-defeating amount of time suspending and expelling students instead of educating them. Finally, to epitomize the educational crisis facing this population of youth—and perhaps the most compelling of the foregoing statistical information concerning education—more African American males receive their GEDs in prison than graduate from college (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1990).

### *Cultural Factors*

Cultural factors may contribute to the stresses experienced by African American male adolescents. Institutionalized racism, for many, is part of daily living (Reed, 1988; Spurlock, 1986; Sum, Harrington, & Goedicke, 1987; Warshauer & Monk, 1978). Persistent exposure to limited opportunities and poverty may exacerbate feelings of helplessness. Neighbors (1987) suggests that a sense of helplessness among African Americans comes from negative expectations originating from limited economic, social, and education opportunities. Individuals who feel helpless view themselves as not being in control of significant influences that affect their lives (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Seligman & Peterson, 1986; Sue & Zane, 1980) and report greater feelings of depression, low-self esteem, and stress (Lloyd, 1980; Loeb, Beck, & Diggory,

1971; Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981; Seligman, 1975; Seligman & Peterson, 1986; Sue & Zane, 1980). Sadly, for African American students who *do* experience success in school with high grades, low incidents of conduct referrals, and regular school attendance, cultural consequences may exist. Research indicates that minority peers often accuse African American adolescents who experience scholastic success of “acting White,” and bullying, social isolation, ridicule, and feelings of community and cultural betrayal may result. (Constantine, Erickson, Banks, & Timberlake, 1998; Steward, Jo, Murray, Fitzgerald, Neil, Fear, & Hill, 1998; Wilson, Cooke, & Arrington, 1997). Thus, negative experiences related to culture may leave African American youth particularly vulnerable to a lack of success in school and vulnerable to potentially negative mental health outcomes.

### *Community Violence*

Witnessing violence within one’s community has been widely recognized as a threat to the optimal development of youth. Bearing witness to acts such as murder, robbery, drive-by shootings, gang battles, police shootouts, and domestic violence have become all too common. Research studies have confirmed that the prevalence with which today’s youth witness violence in their communities is staggering. White, Bruce, Farrell, and Kliewer (1997), for example, found that, in a study of 313 adolescents from a southeastern state, 36% of males and 29% of females reported witnessing a stabbing; 44% of the male and 31% of the females had witnessed a shooting. Fitzpatrick and Boldizer (1993) reported their findings that nearly one-half of a sample of 221 African American low-income urban youth, ages seven through 14 who lived in a southern city, reported witnessing a murder, and nearly 75% reported having seen someone either shot

or shot at. The impact that such exposure to violence has on the developmental psyche of school students has been examined, and the enduring effects of such exposure are disheartening. Slaby (1997) reports that children exposed to violence may become violent themselves through “learned patterns of thought that mediate the use of violence . . . while failing to engage fully those problem-solving skills that could lead to effective, nonviolent solutions” (p. 172-73).

Shakoor and Chalmers (1991) found that the youth who have witnessed violent acts exhibit symptoms of distress, anxiety, persistent fear, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and depression. Similarly, Raia (1995) found an association between witnessing violence and posttraumatic stress symptoms in a study involving 693 junior high school students in low-income communities in Los Angeles. Many investigations on the impact of violence, including the studies mentioned here, have been conducted with children. However, 16- to 19-year olds have much higher levels of exposure to robbery and assault than do younger adolescents and children (Bastian, 1992; Lowry, Sleet, Duncan, Powell, & Kobler, 1995; Rand, 1998). Further, and perhaps most disturbing, because of developmental changes that occur in adolescents’ psychology, older adolescents may actually endure greater consequences of being exposed to community violence (Freedly & Donkervoet, 1995; Greene, 1993). The lasting effects of bearing witness to or participating in violence is well-documented by Garbarino (1995, 1999), and the personal toll that community violence has on children and adolescents is discussed fully in Chapter 2.

## Statement of the Problem

African American males often are met with tremendous challenges. These include, but are not limited to, difficulties and obstructions to success within the educational setting, exposure to community violence, and limited opportunities arising from social, economic, and cultural factors. Although the data indicate disheartening trends that might have a negative impact on African American male youth, many in this population survive in the face of adversity and go on to live successful, productive lives (Anderson, Eaddy, & Williams, 1990).

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the protective factors that exist in the lives of African American male adolescents who reside in a high-risk neighborhood and that facilitate and support their school success. I wish to add voice to the literature by conducting a phenomenologically-oriented study that examines the lived experiences of certain African American male adolescents on the perceived protective factors they believe foster their ability to overcome adversities and threats that exist in their neighborhood and permeate their daily living experiences. Although there has been limited contribution to the empirical literature on protective factors that foster resiliency among members of the African American male adolescent population (Miller, 1999), there have been even fewer qualitative inquiries undertaken to ascribe meaning and insight to the lived experiences of such minority youth. The results of this study can begin to address the significant gap that exists in the literature on this topic. It also can lead to improvements in the way school counselors and other educators act in a

supporting role to those students who are exposed to multiple risk factors and who bring their life circumstances with them each day as they cross the threshold into school.

### Research Question

The primary research question that has guided this study is: What protective factors exist in the lives of African American male adolescents who reside in a high-risk neighborhood that facilitate and support their school success? Research that addresses this population of youth has been scant. This study aims to examine the lived experiences of successful African American youth in an attempt to begin to answer the research question within a qualitative framework.

### Rationale and Theoretical Framework

Several robust rationales exist for conducting this study. First, very little has been investigated about this topic for this particular group of adolescents. Garmezy (1991) has indicated that researchers have “wholly ignored” the examination of resilience in underprivileged youth in ethnic minority groups. Barbarin (1993) remarked that more research attention must be given to African American children who are able to survive and thrive in the face of adversity. Miller (1999) noted that “While the concept of resiliency and factors that promote it have received considerable attention in the social science literature, far fewer studies have examined the development of resiliency among members of racial minorities” (p. 493).

More recently, Resnick (2000) focused on the relationship between a strong sense of connection to parents, family members, and other adults, school and community-based establishments and the ability of African American adolescents to make a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood. Resnick’s study examined protective factors

that were demonstrated through existing relationships, but it was empirical in nature. Spitler, et al. (2002) conducted a study, the purpose of which was to gain consensus among service providers, schools, and communities about essential program characteristics necessary to promote success among at-risk African American youth. Useful strategies for collaboration between service providers and communities were illuminated in this study, but input from African American youth was not included. Spitler, et al. noted, “Those who work with adolescents have called for a better understanding of how minority youth develop ‘buffering activities’ and psychologically protective factors” (p. 38). Research is moving closer to examining protective factors present in the population of successful African American male adolescents, but few studies have examined how minority youth ascribe *meaning* to the protective factors that exist in their lives.

Second, research on resiliency and protective factors often examines *single* risks and *single* protective factors (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003), when most youth are affected by multiple protective factors (environmental and systemic) and possess a number of assets that foster resiliency (intrinsic to the individual) in the face of adversity (Glantz & Sloboda, 1999; Sameroff, Gutman, & Peck, 2003). For example, Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, and Maton (1999) noted that extensive research exists that focuses on psychological risk factors among African American youth with prevention strategies concentrating on reducing those risks. Their study examined the sociopolitical control on the mental health of African American youth and suggested that an alternative approach to addressing risk could be to enhance protective factors as a way of reducing negative outcomes. Before the enhancement of protective factors is feasible, however, insight into

the nature of these protective factors first must be uncovered. The current piece of research aims to give meaning to such “insights” through the descriptions provided by the resilient youth who participate in this study and the study’s results advance the literature on a valuable and under researched topic.

Finally, my personal experiences as a school counselor initially piqued my interest in investigating this topic. I regularly work with students whose resilience in the face of adversity moves and inspires me. I was specifically motivated to conduct this piece of research after having worked with several minority students who lived in chronic poverty within a drug-infested area of their neighborhood and who also experienced extremely disorganized family environments. The combination of stressors experienced by these students placed them at risk for developing behavior and emotional problems (Werner & Smith, 1992) and placed them at a higher risk for developing depression, school failure, delinquency, and risk-taking behaviors (Donovan, Jessor, & Costa, 1988). Yet, these students enjoyed good school attendance, remained on track to graduate, and earned their high school diplomas. By working closely with this minority population of students, by increasing my personal knowledge and awareness, and by understanding protective factors through the perspectives of minority students, I have become a more adept and better informed counselor.

This study involves an ecological view of protective factors affecting African American male adolescents, that is, a perspective that includes the interface of the individual and his environment. These are youth who reside in a high-risk neighborhood. Therefore, information pertaining to the identified high-risk neighborhood, the high



school in which participants' attend, and the selected participants themselves, is offered below.

### *Milltown*

The neighborhood in which participants of this study reside (hereinafter referred to as “Milltown<sup>1</sup>”) encompasses an area slightly more than two square miles, and was once a thriving steel mill town along the Ohio River, close to the border separating Pennsylvania and Ohio. The nearest metropolitan city is Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, located less than 40 miles from Milltown. Today, when driving along the mile-long main thoroughfare of this urban community, it is apparent that the closure of the mills had a deep impact upon this compact neighborhood in Western Pennsylvania. Many shops are closed; some have graffiti-painted sheets of plywood protecting the storefronts; some abandoned buildings simply have faded “For Sale” signs taped to the doors. The commercial establishments that are currently operational include a Dollar General, one gas station, two convenience stores, several bars, a photographer, a florist, two funeral homes, a beer distributor, a small library, and two small, independently-owned restaurants. Within a three-block span, there are branches of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Knights of Columbus, and the American Legion. There are two banks—one with a drive-through teller, one small pizza shop, and one recently-closed beauty salon.

Many of the houses that can be viewed from the main street are poorly maintained. Some are in need of new roofs and have missing shingles or visible holes; some are without windows or have blue plastic tarps covering window openings; many display peeling paint, rotting woodwork, or crumbling concrete. On a street two blocks

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the small population of the identified community, it seems that a fictitious name would better protect the identities of the resident participants.

parallel to the main artery of town are houses that are closely-spaced, many with glassless windows or storm doors, some with partly missing roofs. According to the local authorities, several of these houses are known crack houses. Within one block, many of these houses have porches or properties that are littered with plastic trash cans, broken plastic lawn or patio furniture, and unwanted or unusable toys—deflated basketballs or soccer balls, bicycles missing one or both tires, or cracked or deflated plastic swimming pools. Several houses have unfriendly-looking pit bulls chained outside, perhaps warning trespassers to stay away. Many of the residential streets have a surplus of deep potholes, and are narrow and difficult to navigate because vehicles are parked tightly together on both sides of the streets. Most homes do not have a garage or a driveway, and there are several very short, narrow alleyways that weave through town and connect one block with the next. Several streets away from the main artery are two public housing communities. These, too, are in poor condition as evidenced by original single-pane windows, many with cracks that are covered by duct tape. Many apartments have improperly-installed window air-conditioning units; some windows are boarded over with plywood. “For Rent” signs are posted in the windows of many units, indicating a high vacancy rate. The driveways leading to these developments are extremely rough, and driving is slow-going and dangerous due to the dire condition of the roadways.

When driving through the streets of Milltown, one may get the sense of better days at a time when the mills were fully operational. Despite the poor condition and age of the mostly frame houses, many are substantial in size; some boast three levels that can be viewed from the street. Some homes exhibit interesting architecture and a few have gingerbread detailing on the outside trim work, symbolizing the care and thought that was

originally given to the development of these homes. As one leaves the heart of Milltown and moves closer towards a neighboring community, the houses begin to enjoy more property. Some have driveways and garages, and many are constructed of brick or stone. The last cluster of homes on the outskirts of town is a brick row house complex, originally built to house mill workers. The feeling here is depressing and sad, as the complex appears to be in an overall state of disarray and dilapidation.

Attestation of the problems permeating Milltown recently headlined the local newspaper. In one article, a family new to the area complained that part of the problem “is abandoned and blighted properties that at best serve to limit the number of residents to keep tabs on the neighborhood and at worst are havens for drug use and prostitution—and potential fire hazards” (Snyder, 2007). This family says their dreams of a new home have been tainted so badly by the drug activity in the neighborhood that they vowed never to let their children play alone outside of the home. In a second article, it was reported that a well-known Milltown resident died after being persuaded to jump about 20 feet from a second-floor brick staircase of an abandoned building onto a concrete sidewalk in exchange for crack cocaine. The cause of death is under investigation but is believed to be the result of multiple blunt-force trauma to the head. The article was accompanied by a picture of a local fire department employee hosing blood stains from the sidewalk where children who live in Milltown are often seen playing.

Based on the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau report (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), the majority, 57.6%, of the houses in Milltown, were built prior to 1939. According to the Census 2000 Demographic Profile Highlights, 17.3% of families residing in Milltown fell below the poverty level, almost double the national average of 9.2%. Individuals who fell

below the poverty level comprised 20.3% of Milltown's population, compared with 12.4% of individuals nationally. Of the 3,137 residents of Milltown, most have not extended their education beyond high school—only 6.4% of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 24.4% of individuals nationally. At the time of the 2000 Census, 30.5% of Milltown's population qualified for disability status, compared with the national disability status of 19.3%. Housing is primarily renter-occupied, with 52.5% of the neighborhood residents renting their homes. Vacant houses comprise 13.7% of the total housing units, compared with only 9% nationally. Female heads-of-household, most with children living at home, comprise 27.7% of the Milltown's population, and in 2000, Milltown's racial makeup was 75.7% White, 20.8% Black, and 2.1% bi-racial. Notable in the makeup of this small community is the number of places of worship. Within the 2.04 square mile area, there are a total of 11 churches: two Baptist, two Serbian Orthodox, two Presbyterian, one Methodist, one Catholic, and three non-denominational. There is one elementary/middle school located in Milltown with a 2006 enrollment of 331 students who attend kindergarten through eighth grade.

When compared with the closest bordering community of 1,921 residents (hereinafter, called "Hawktown<sup>2</sup>"), Milltown's crime rates, obtained from the Pennsylvania Uniform Crimes Reporting System website, are astonishing. Table 1.1 compares police charges filed on individuals who reside in Milltown with police charges filed on individuals who reside in Hawktown during the four year period, 2002 through 2006.

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<sup>2</sup> Again, due to the small population of the community in question, it seems that a fictitious name would better protect the identity of both the community and of the participants of this study.

Table 1

*Comparison of Filed Police Charges*

<i>Categories of Crimes</i>	<i>Police charges filed between the years 2000 and 2006</i>	
	<i>Hawktown (pop. 1,921)</i>	<i>Milltown (pop. 3,137)</i>
Robbery	9	124
Aggravated Assault		
Burglary		
Drug sales	5	189
Drug possession		
Public drunkenness	28	251
Disorderly conduct		

According to the definition provided by The Annie E. Casey Foundation (1997), the most distressed neighborhoods include those with “multiple risk factors such as poverty, single female-headed households, unemployment, limited or non-existent support services, declining community resources, and reliance on public assistance” (p.

ii). The Encyclopedia of Education (2002) proposes:

Clusters of interlocking and corrosive conditions are persistent in high-risk neighborhoods, and are evidenced by the dense and dilapidated housing, a real and constant threat of violent crime, inadequate and inaccessible health care, a lack of employment opportunities that pay a living wage, and unreliable and limited public transportation . . . Omnipresent drug

traffic and a constant threat of victimization minimize opportunities for interdependence and delimit social interaction among neighbors within the community. High transience rates in these neighborhoods lead to blocks of unstable and abandoned housing. "Parenting: High-Risk Neighborhoods."

The foregoing delineations, combined with the demographic and statistical information provided above, undoubtedly qualify Milltown as a "high risk" neighborhood.

Within the last two years, there has been some promise of development and hope toward growth in Milltown. In 2006, a state-of-the art performing arts school was opened on the spot where Milltown's former high school once stood. There are approximately 300 students who currently attend this school from many areas—some who travel up to two hours. A Subway restaurant, the only chain restaurant in Milltown, recently opened across the street from the new performing arts school and is a popular eatery for Milltown's residents. Subway is one of a few establishments that can provide an opportunity for part-time jobs to adolescents residing in Milltown. One wonders if those funding these recent developments perceptively anticipate that Milltown might someday develop into a more prosperous and desirable place in which to live and raise a family.

### *Hope High School*

Hope High School<sup>3</sup>, the high school which all study participants attend, is a single-level, yellow-bricked school that lacks architectural interest. It sits atop a hill in a rural community overlooking farmland and wooded property. The school opened in 1962 and currently receives students from three boroughs spanning a 34.5 square mile area.

Many people living in the Hope school district have been rooted in the area for

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the small population of the identified community, it seems that a fictitious name would better protect the identities of the resident participants.

generations, and some teachers have shared that they have taught both grandparents and parents of current students. Many young people who attend Hope High School ultimately settle down in this community where they and their parents grew up. Even students who are bright and highly motivated tend to stay local, and many attend junior college after graduation while continuing to live at home. Of the fifty-two percent of students who attend some type of post-secondary educational program, less than five percent of graduating students from Hope High School attend college out of state.

Hope High School is the undisputed focal point of community life with football being at its nucleus. Football has a strong tradition of participation and success, characterized by Saturday afternoon games that are highly energetic and well attended by students, parents, faculty, school staff, and community members. In 2007, the varsity basketball team won the Section Championship for the first time in the school's history, and team supporters traveled up to three hours to attend playoff games. The community shows its support for other activities as well. The annual school musical enjoys near sell-out crowds in each of its three showings. Hope High School also has a proud tradition of a marching band and show choir that routinely win honors in local competitions.

Within the boundaries of Hope school district exist an array of places of worship including ten churches: seven Christian, one Luthern, one Jehovahs Witness, and one Presbyterian. There are no grocery stores within the parameters of Hope school district—only two small country markets. Caucasians comprise 96.1% of the school district's population, African Americans 1.9%, and Hispanics 1.4%. Three golf courses and one very small country club provide opportunities for recreation.

In 1987, Milltown's high school closed due to low enrollment, and students who

resided in Milltown were forced to attend high school outside of their own school district. For many years, students living in Milltown were bussed across State lines to attend a high school in Ohio. There were various attempts at tuition agreements with several school districts located logistically farther than Hope school district. Hope High School would have been the most logical choice for students to attend due to its close proximity to Milltown, but disputes between the administration and school boards of these neighboring districts prevented Milltown students from become students of Hope school district. Students who resided in Milltown and students who resided in the Hope school district grew up knowing each other from playing football, basketball, and baseball together in community leagues. Yet, for decades, these students were not permitted to attend school together.

Finally in 2004, after many years of negotiation between school boards and district administrators, residents of Milltown were given the option to send their students to Hope High School under a tuition agreement. Since then, Hope High School has accepted approximately a twelve percent increase in its student body from Milltown—roughly ten percent of whom are African American. This influx of students introduced racial diversity to Hope High School for the first time in the school's history. At times during the first two years in which students from Milltown attended Hope High School, racial tensions were palpable between minority and non-minority students. The administration of Hope High School worked diligently to address and resolve these issues with parents, faculty, and students, and Hope High School presently enjoys racial harmony, with very few, sporadic problems between minority and non-minority students.



All five students who agreed to participate in this research study currently reside in Milltown and currently attend Hope High School.

### *Individual Participants*

Within the identified neighborhood of Milltown, there were a total of eleven African American male adolescents who attend Hope High School. Only those students who had attended Hope High School for more than one academic school year were invited to participate in this study. This is for the reason that, by the time the collection of data for this study was underway, ninth grade students had only attended Hope High School for six months—too short a time period to determine school success for these students. Of the remaining six students who met the qualifications to partake in this study, all six agreed to participate. After returning a signed assent form, one of the six students abruptly moved from the area, leaving the study with five consenting participants.

### Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This study has relied upon a theoretical framework comprised of Ryan and Deci's (2000; 2006) self-determination theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 2004) theory of human development. The lived experiences of the adolescents under investigation embody the methodological framework that supports this study. Personal life stories are shared by the co-researchers, and from the narratives offered by these youth, I developed a richer and enhanced understanding of protective factors that exist in their lives that facilitate and support their school success. The theoretical frameworks are described more fully in Chapter 2, and the interfacing of the lived experiences of co-researchers with these theoretical frameworks is detailed more fully in Chapters 4 and 5.

## Significance of Study

The significance of conducting this inquiry is twofold. First, as unique protective factors that exist for African American male adolescents are explicated and illuminated, school counselors and other educators can be better positioned to help foster resiliency through appropriate intervention strategies developed specifically to address the needs of this population. Second, school counselors can use this information to develop culturally appropriate strategies for engaging youth. In either case, research addressing this currently void area would advance the literature through the qualitative study of a minority population that has been sorely overlooked on the issues of protective factors and resilience. Research on this relevant topic could lay a foundation for continued inquiry into protective factors unique to other minority populations or minority youth who are female. It may be possible, then, to integrate knowledge from what has already been learned about protective factors in the lives of adolescents with knowledge relating to protective factors that may be unique to ethnic minority youth, which could begin to inform school counselors and other educators about the needs of *all* adolescents.

## Definition of Terms

There are several terms that need to be defined for the purposes of this study. These include: African American male adolescent, protective factors, resilience, school attendance, and school success. The definitions for the purposes of this study are provided below:

**African American male adolescent:** an African American male, between the ages of 15 and 19 who, at the time of the study, resides in Milltown and attends Hope High School.

**Protective Factors:** specific mechanisms that “ameliorate” or “buffer” “a person’s reaction to a situation that in ordinary circumstances leads to maladaptive outcomes,” (Werner & Smith, 1992, p. 5). The “situation” for the purposes of this study is residence in a high-risk neighborhood.

**Resilience:** “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (Masten, Best, & Garnezy, 1990, p. 426).

**School Success:** experienced by students who, at the time of the study, are on track to graduate, determined by the maintenance of passing grades.

#### Delimitations of the Study

The sample was delimited to only those adolescents, between the ages 15 to 19, who live in a high-risk neighborhood, who have attended Hope High School for at least one full academic year, and who have enjoyed school success, since the study was designed to examine protective factors for only those African American male adolescents who met these criteria.

#### Summary of the Inquiry

In the foregoing Chapter 1, I presented an introduction that illuminates the need for conducting this study. I also offered the rationale for conducting this study and discussed the significance of conducting this study. In Chapter 2, I offer a theoretical framework to support this study and review the relevant literature regarding protective factors and success relative to African American male adolescents by giving a concise overview of the types of studies that have previously been conducted on these topics. The result of the literature review demonstrates that further research with the African American male adolescent population is appreciable. In Chapter 3, I examine the

methodology applied to this body of research and discuss how a combination of a phenomenologically-oriented approach and a case study approach support my research question. In Chapter 4, I include a discussion around the themes of protective factors that emerged while evaluating my data, and I offer dialogue from the participants that support this analysis. In Chapter 5, I discuss my findings of the protective factors that exist in the lives of my participants along with recommendations for future research in this area of study.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review of the literature has three primary aims: (1) to introduce the theoretical framework that is the foundation for this piece of research; and (2) to provide a concise overview of the literature that highlights the key issues related to protective factors and success for members of the African American male adolescent population.

#### Theoretical Framework

When considering the personal, psychological, cognitive, cultural, educational, social, environmental, and biological components that comprise an individual, I would be remiss to frame my understanding of the lived human experience of participants in this study solely within the parameters of one theoretical approach, as no one theory can take into account every component and nuance of an individual.

This chapter, then, provides a discussion of two primary theories in an effort to begin to account for the multifaceted complexity that is the lived experience of the African American male adolescents under investigation. The primary guiding theory, self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000; 2006), receives the most attention, as its central focus addresses the personal, psychological, and cognitive aspects of the individual, with analogous attention given to the role that social environment plays in the development of one's personal well-being. A congruent theory, the bio-ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2004), serves as a secondary focal point of this chapter insofar as it provides a useful paradigm by which we can understand the developing person, his or her environment, and the evolving interaction between the two.

*Self-Determination Theory: Three fundamental needs*

This study relies primarily on the work of Ryan and Deci (2000; 2006), who formulated self-determination theory (SDT) of personality and human motivation. SDT seeks to explain well-being in terms of the extent to which three basic, fundamental needs are satisfied. The three needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are regarded as “innate, essential, and universal—found throughout different cultures and times” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 74). The following discussion correlates the needs specified in SDT with the needs indicative of healthy adolescent development.

*Autonomy.* Simply stated, autonomy refers to the perceived internal locus of causality experienced by individuals. That is, the idea that we, as humans, are doing things because we choose to do them; we enjoy the freedom of decision, and we value a sense of control over our environments. Ryan and Deci (2006) note that, “*autonomy* retains its primary etymological meaning of self-governance, or rule by the self” (p. 1562). Autonomy is not to be confused with independence. Independence is defined by Webster’s II New College Dictionary as “2. Free from the influence, guidance, or control of another, or others” (p. 563). Autonomy includes an individual’s feeling of having a voice and choice in activities and some adolescents, though demonstrating a high level of autonomy, still demonstrate a willingness to rely on their parents for emotional support (Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Ryan 1993). Autonomy is acknowledged in SDT as one of the three basic needs, and Ryan and Deci (2000) summarize its importance as being a “salient issue across development, life domains, and cultures, and is of central import for personality functioning and wellness” (p. 1580).

*Competence.* Competence refers to the need to feel that we have the ability to do what we wish to do, and that, of the things that we choose to do, we are confident that we can complete them to a successful outcome. White (1959) posits that “The need for competence concerns people’s inherent desire to be effective in dealing with the environment,” (p.297) but in a way that is not content-specific. Similarly, Deci and Ryan (2000) offer this comment about competence:

Indeed, the striving for competence as a relatively general propensity can thus be seen as the route to actualizing specific adaptive competencies and to the flexible functioning of human groups in the context of changing environmental demands (p.253).

Vansteenkiste, et al. (2004) report that since these needs are essential, “people tend to orient toward those situations that allow satisfaction of the needs and away from those that thwart the need” (p. 23). A finding of this study may be the determination that the resiliency demonstrated in the participants under investigation relates to their levels of competence in orienting themselves towards need-fulfilling situations and away from need-negating situations.

*Relatedness.* Relatedness refers simply to the need for humans to feel close to and connected to significant others. Lynch and Levers (2007) define relatedness as “a sense of belongingness with others and with one’s community” (p.XX.). It is surmised that the concept of relatedness may have developed during the era of evolutionary adaptation with the emergence of the hunter-gatherer society (Deci & Ryan, 2000). That is, when individuals could better internalize the needs of the group, feel connected to and care for the group, and coordinate those needs with others in the group, they would experience

greater success. Stevens and Fiske (1995) hypothesize that “under such circumstances, a cohesive group would clearly have provided considerably more protection than a less cohesive social organization” (p. 192).

Social development models linking relatedness with social experience were reviewed by Reis, et al. (2000) in an effort to identify major types of social activity that seemed to contribute to an overall sense of relatedness. From their review, Reis, et al. determined that seven main types of social activity support feelings of relatedness in people. They are reported here because the concept of relatedness seems particularly relevant to this study.

1. communicating about personally relevant matters,
2. participating in shared activities,
3. having a group of friends with whom one can spend informal social time (i.e., “hanging out”),
4. feeling understood and appreciated,
5. participating in pleasant or otherwise enjoyable activities,
6. avoiding arguments and conflict that create distance and feelings of disengagement with significant others, and
7. avoiding self-conscious or insecure feelings that direct attention toward the self and away from others.

(p. 422). The importance of relatedness within the adolescent experience is well known, and anyone who works with or lives with adolescents can, no doubt, support this notion. Communication and feeling understood and appreciated (Items 1 through 4) seem particularly germane during the adolescent experience. Though people in general are



inherently motivated to seek meaningful, reciprocal, and enduring relationships, adolescent development involves an intense draw towards the satisfaction of the particular need of relatedness.

*Motivation.* SDT is also concerned with the personal movement of people towards self-growth opportunities through the nature of motivation. Two basic types of motivation—intrinsic or extrinsic—move individuals to act “by very different types of factors, with highly varied experiences and consequences” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 69). SDT research has also investigated factors that “hinder or undermine” a person’s motivation, social functioning, and well-being. Thus, SDT is “concerned not only with the specific nature of positive developmental tendencies, but it also examines social environments that are antagonistic toward these tendencies” (p. 69). In exploring the existence of protective factors in the lives of the adolescents under investigation for this study, examined are the roles that intrinsic or extrinsic motivation factors play in the participants’ ability to act in ways that have facilitated success and to unearth any antagonistic social environments that they may have had to conquer along the way.

## Summary

Reis, et al. (2000) liken the satisfaction of SDT's three basic psychological human needs to the biological needs of a plant. Namely, a plant needs water, sunlight, and specific minerals to thrive, based on the observation that the growth, health, and integrity of the plant is compromised when any one of these nutrients is withheld or is unavailable. The SDT model considers autonomy, competence, and relatedness to be essential psychological nutrients for humans that, when satisfied, are expected to enhance ongoing psychological growth, integrity, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Much like the plant that would deteriorate with unmet needs, when factors detract from the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, well-being, psychological growth, and motivation in individuals may likely be thwarted.

This piece of research examines African American male adolescents who, despite continued exposure to threats or adversities, possess adaptation characteristics that have allowed them to achieve success in school. The inner play between specific protective factors and the high-risk environments in which the participant adolescents live is the concept under investigation here. Because SDT "highlights the importance of humans' evolved inner resources for personality development . . ." (Ryan, Kuhl, & Deci, 1997, p. 68), this theory provides a useful set of concepts to support the notion that resilient adolescents likely possess "inner resources" that help offset their exposures to threat and adversities that might otherwise impede their success.

### Bio-ecological model: a complimentary approach

Lynch and Levers (2007) illustrate how many contemporary researchers have used Bronfenbrenner's theory to link with other transactional theories such as SDT.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 2005) bio-ecological model of human development seeks to explain individual knowledge, growth, and competencies in terms of ecological influences and the effects they have on development. This study seeks to discover protective factors that exist in the lives of African American male adolescents who live in a high-risk neighborhood; hence, this model is useful in providing a framework for understanding the impact that a high-risk neighborhood may have on the participants.

Within the context of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model (now referred to as the *bioecological* model) of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2004; Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), protective factors are believed to exist within a complex arrangement of relationships between an individual and his or her multiple environments. Bronfenbrenner's model identifies important and fluid systems of which each individual is a part. Bronfenbrenner stated, "The ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (p. 3). Together, these systems are termed the "social context" of human development and begin with the innermost system, the *microsystem*, being at the center of the set of concentric rings, with the systems ranging from minute inputs of direct interactions with social agents to broad-based inputs of culture.

The *microsystem* includes family, peers, classroom settings, and religious settings. The *mesosystem* is defined by interactions among the *Microsystems* (e.g., when parents and teachers coordinate their efforts to educate a child). The *exosystem* includes influences from school, community, health agencies, neighbors, and the mass media, and the *macrosystem* involves attitudes and ideologies of the culture, one's nationality, society, and governing political systems. The growth and development of the individual

is influenced by each one of these interconnected systems. Bronfenbrenner's (1988) original theory assumed that the environmental influences on a child were unidirectional, meaning, for example, that a child's development was influenced solely by his or her microsystem. He later modified his paradigm to allow for the possibility that influences can move in *either* direction in any of the four systems, i.e., a child may have as much influence on his or her microsystem as the microsystem has on the child.

*Process-person-context model*

The original ecological theory was developed in the early 1970s and expanded over time as Bronfenbrenner's research developed and as his ideas were challenged. Out of the bioecological model developed the process-person-context model as a means to illuminate "the ways in which particular characteristics of the person or the context can influence such processes as mediating factors, moderating factors, or both" (p. 80). Bronfenbrenner applied the process-person-context model in his discussion of Werner and Smith's (1987) pioneering study on resiliency. Bronfenbrenner (1992) viewed the landmark Werner and Smith study of Hawaiian children as research rich with information about the personal attributes and environmental characteristics of highly vulnerable children. Bronfenbrenner commented, however, that "the specific processes and pathways that enabled some of them [Hawaiian children] to 'escape' remain unclear" (p. 115), and offered the process-person-context model as a way to assuage this lack of understanding. The process-person-context model allows for "variations in developmental processes and outcomes associated with different ecological niches" (p. 118). Ecological niches refer to "regions in the environment that are especially favorable

or unfavorable to the development of individuals with particular personal characteristics” (p. 111).

For the purposes of this study, protective factors are viewed not as a singular component of an adolescent’s ability to overcome adversity, but in conjunction with the complex, multi-dimensional, and interconnected systems of which the participants under investigation are a part. In sum, the application of the process-person-context model permits the assessment of the adolescents’ contributions to their own development; the bioecological model takes into account the many ecological systems at work in shaping the development of the individual.

#### Review of Relevant Literature

The purpose of the following review of relevant literature is to provide a concise overview of the literature that highlights the key issues related to protective factors that facilitate success in certain African American male adolescents who reside in a high-risk neighborhood. Current research on adolescent development, community violence and its impact on youth, and studies of resilience and protective factors are discussed here.

#### *Adolescent Development*

This section will focus on male adolescent development and the unique challenges that adolescent males face in their journey towards adulthood. Adolescent development among African American males will next be addressed. Just as there are unique differences between male and female development throughout adolescence, so, too, are there unique differences in the type of challenges—cultural, social, and academic—faced by African American male adolescents. These differences will be

examined to shed light on how these unique factors play a role in the development of minority youth.

Though many adults recall adolescence as a difficult time wrought with uncertainty, confusion, and conflict, this time of life can be a wonderful and rich time for boys and their families. Pollack (1998) says this about male adolescence:

It is during adolescence that all the prior years of parenting begin to show tangible results—you begin to see the outline of the man you have helped to create. The boy, too, can feel a new sense of self-esteem during adolescence, as he understands that he is his own person and he is valued—not just as a member of the family but as a member of the community at large (p. 147).

Boys who are raised in caring, loving, and supportive homes may enjoy the validation and self-esteem described above and may not experience adolescence negatively. The myths embedded in our culture that normal adolescence is a difficult, stormy time and that puberty is a consistently negative event for adolescents are being dispelled. Offer's (1992) study of adolescents indicate that 80% of all adolescents, including urban youth, do *not* experience turmoil as part of their adolescent experience and negotiate this developmental period with little difficulty.

Yet for many young men, adolescence can be a very perilous and confusing time of life. Pollack's (1998) findings on male adolescence attribute these difficulties to two underlying psychological factors: (1) conflicting messages about masculinity and manhood received from society, peers, and parents, and (2) ambivalent feelings about male adulthood (Pollack, p. 146). When boys who are raised in stable, loving, and

supportive environments experience this tumult as part of their development into manhood, one can imagine the array of difficulties young boys might experience who do *not* have support and guidance during this period of development.

Pollack (1998) ascribes part of the “painful process of self-clarification” experienced by male adolescents to the mixed messages they receive.

On the one hand, society tells boys they should be cool, confident, and strong. At the same time, society tells boys they should be egalitarian (particularly in relation to girls), sensitive, and open with their feelings (p. 146).

The painful process comes into play when boys attempt to sort out the complex task of trying to meet both of these sets of expectations. Pollack’s discussion of “ambivalent feelings” towards male adulthood refers primarily to the fact that adolescent boys are “bombarded” with conflicting messages about how the “ideal man” is expected to behave. Male adolescents may not see any appealing male role models who realistically demonstrate how to act. Compounding these developmental difficulties are issues such as the emergence of sexuality and all of the dangers, complications, uncertainties, and insecurities that go along with it, peer pressures, a disconnect from families as young men search for their individual identities, and academic pressures placed on them by society, schools, and families.

Part of my reasoning for wanting to conduct this research was to understand how some adolescents emerge as grounded, happy, and successful individuals, given that these complexities do not even consider realities such as family dysfunction, high-risk neighborhoods, exposure to crime and violence, and so forth. By listening to the stories

of certain African American male adolescents who are enjoying school success, we can begin to understand how a developmental experience often wrought with uncertainty and insecurity may be compensated by protective factors that help this group of adolescents conquer obstacles and achieve goals despite negative circumstances in their lives.

### *Adolescent Development Among African American Males*

African American male adolescents face the same challenges experienced by all adolescents. What makes the adolescent experience distinctive for African American males are the cultural, social, and academic challenges that do not confront their non-minority counterparts. The social and cultural development of African American adolescents is of great interest to this piece of research, and a discussion on these aspects of African American adolescent development is offered below.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological framework recognizes the "social context" of one's development and takes into account the many interconnected systems of an individual's environment and the influence that those systems have on the person an individual eventually becomes. Like Bronfenbrenner, Kuykendall (2004) discusses the interplay between the many elements that factor into the specific development of African American youth. Regarding social development, Kuykendall offers three primary influences—the home and family, the peer group, and other social systems, as being figural in the development of African American youth and states, "One's social self-image determines how individuals feel about their interactions with others in a social setting" (p. 33).



### *The Home and Family*

Part of the task of adolescence is to begin to develop an autonomous identity and individual sense of self. Adolescents begin to search for individuation, while at the same time needing to know that their families will still be present for them and will continue to provide a “living wall of love that they can lean on and bounce off.” (Pollack, 1998, p. 173). It should be noted that African American family support, like non-minority family support, falls along a continuum and encompasses a broad range of dynamics, only the surface of which is scratched here. The following discussion begins to illuminate the dynamics that offer support and stability to African American adolescents as they develop into adulthood.

African American families are more likely to be headed by a single woman, often the biological mother, or the grandmother (Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996). African American families may also rely on extended family networks or “fictive kin” to assist with childrearing and family management. Fictive kin refers to individuals who are unrelated by either birth or marriage, but who have an emotionally significant relationship with the family. In African American homes, fictive kin often take on the characteristics of a family relationship (Jarrett & Burton, 1999; Kane, 2000). Zimmerman, et al. (2000) has found that, for African American children and adolescents, having an attentive and supportive family member correlates to having internalizing and externalizing child behaviors, and fictive kin provides multiple opportunities for attention and support to the developing adolescent. In a study examining internalization difficulties among African American youth and their relation to social support and activity involvement, Margolin (2005) found that, “Youth who have at least one family member

who is caring and supportive and who engages with them in activities suffer less [with depression, social anxiety, low self-esteem, and loneliness] than those without protective factors” (p. 141). Understanding the effectiveness of a strong family structure is an imperative insight for school counselors and others working with this population of youth. School counselors are often in a position to educate other members of school systems about the importance and appreciation of culturally-relevant aspects of the African American family structure on topics such as fictive kin, for example. Also with an awareness of family structure, school counselors are well-positioned to harness the support of at least one family member who may provide the necessary protective factors that would offset any risks an adolescent might be facing. For these preventive interventions to be at all effective, however, school counselors must first be culturally aware of family dynamics within this population so that interventions are viewed by the African American family as culturally sound.

### *Peer Groups*

As with all youth, African American youth have a strong need for acceptance, affection, appreciation, approval, and achievement (Bell, 1985). When these needs are not met through interactions with adults, adolescents in this population often seek to satisfy these needs through connections made with peers who are part of the same street culture of their communities, who accept their shortcomings, approve of their talents and abilities, and appreciate their strengths (Kuykendall, 2005, p. 35). It is through these peer interactions that behavioral norms are often developed.

The way many Black . . . youth talk, walk, dress, dance, play competitive sports, rap, exhibit sexuality, become street-wise . . . with one another

reflect the extent to which they have internalized their self-worth and place within their peer group subculture. How they see themselves within the context of peer relations is very important to their social development. . . . All too often, the maintenance of a positive ego and requisite self-respect for Black . . . teens requires the support and solidarity of peer associations in the absence of other supportive adult relations (p. 36).

As part of adolescent development, African American youth, like non-minority youth, rely heavily on the bonds formed with their peers, but friendships among African American adolescents have been identified as being particularly intimate and influential (Taylor, 1989). Gutman, et al. (2002) conducted a study that investigated the effects of multiple risks and positive family interaction and social support factors on the achievement-related outcomes of African American youth. Their findings suggest that “the significance of peer support is particularly pronounced for African Americans exposed to multiple risks during early adolescence” (p. 378). More specifically, the Gutman, et al. study indicates that:

African American adolescents exposed to multiple risks who perceive that they can depend on their peers for help with their personal and school difficulties may be more likely to experience higher academic outcomes than are their counterparts who perceive their peers as less supportive (p. 378).

School counselors and others working in educational settings can apply the information gleaned from studies on peer relations within the African American population by

developing programs that meet the needs of this group of students. Intervention efforts may be especially beneficial if schools can capitalize on the positive influence and sense of connection African American students share with their peers. Programs that enhance peer networking such as peer mentoring or peer tutoring are examples of intervention efforts that could support and facilitate protective factors within the school climate.

#### *Social Contributions Having an Impact on African American Youth*

In addition to family and peer influences on the development of African American adolescents, cultural distinctions contributing to the social development of minority adolescents also must be acknowledged, as cultural practices shape the person an adolescent eventually becomes and also shapes an adolescent's worldview. Two examples of cultural contributions that offer a glimpse into the development of African American male adolescent are offered below.

The first contribution is the significant role that the church has played in the lives of many African American youth. Brown and Gary (1991) found that self-reports of church involvement were positively related to successful educational outcomes among African American adults. Zimmerman, et al. (1992) found that African American youth who left high school before graduation and were not employed, but who regularly attended church, had relatively low levels of alcohol and drug abuse. Seaborn-Thompson and Ensminger (1989) conducted an interview of African American adults and found that 74% responded "very often" or "often" to the statement, "The religious beliefs I learned when I was young still help me." Haight (1998) summarized a portion of her findings after conducting research within an African American community in Salt Lake City, Utah, this way:

Church was described by all the informants as a haven in which children could learn about their heritage from other African Americans who valued and nurtured them. Through the church, children are exposed to the hopeful, loving, and egalitarian message of the Christian gospels (p. 216).

Haight's findings also revealed that many of her informants found spirituality to be protective and "a healthy way of coping with the trials of life" (p. 216). Finally, Haight's findings highlight a number of socialization themes that emphasize the relevance of spirituality in African Americans that are often applied to their everyday lives.

...during the regular Sunday services, the pastor invites all the children to come to the front of the church where they are told a story, for example, an African folktale. That story is then related to biblical texts. In vacation Bible school, adults discuss with children African American history and culture in relation to biblical themes. Thus, in Sunday school children may be stimulated to reflect on spiritual beliefs as they relate to themselves as individuals, whereas in the big church, they are encouraged to relate spiritual beliefs to themselves as members of a larger, African American community (p. 219).

In addition to providing a sense of identity, community, and spirituality, many African American churches also offer programs designed to foster resilience in African American youth. Rubin, Billingsley, and Caldwell (1994) surveyed 635 northeastern and north central African American churches to determine the types of programs that churches provide. The authors found that 28% of churches surveyed offered at least one program for adolescents including teen support programs, substance abuse programs,

parenting and sexuality programs, AIDS support programs, programs that offered financial support for college attendance, and counseling programs directed at at-risk youth. For school counselors and others working in the education environment, developing an understanding of the cultural beliefs and practices, such as the role of church in the lives of African American adolescents, seems crucial in developing a more robust appreciation of the unique types of supports that exist in the lives of these adolescents.

A second example of a social activity that is culturally-unique to the experience of some African American youth is a recreational pastime called “playing the dozens.” From an outsider’s perspective, this game may look like a hostile exchange. Yet, in many African American communities, it is considered an art form (Kuykendall, 2004, p. 36). “Playing the dozens” requires emotional control, creative thinking, quickness and mental agility, and a sense of humor. It usually involves two males (sometimes females) in a verbal showdown with both parties making verbal derogatory or negative statements directed at a member of the other participant’s family—often the mother. These statements are in no way meant to show disrespect, but are considered verbal “duels” that show off participants’ skills at the game. It is necessary for school counselors and others in education environments to become culturally sensitive to games like “playing the dozens” since participants can become verbally aggressive and loud as part of the play. Without an understanding of the cultural significance of games like “playing the dozens,” responses from school figures in authority might be premature or inappropriate.

The foregoing two examples offer a brief illustration of the kind of social and cultural differences that may exist in the development of African American male

adolescents. This minority population of youth also experience unique issues pertaining to academic and educational development, and the following discussion brings forth some of these concerns.

### *Academic Achievement and Adolescent Development*

Within the educational setting, African American students face unique challenges. Ravitch (2000) believed that the main purpose of educating a diverse society should be to equalize it by disseminating knowledge and directing intelligence to everyone. Kuykendall (2004) responded to this belief by stating that “Public schools, for the most part, have not served our Black . . . youth very well” (p. 2) and “the continued underachievement and isolation of such a large and growing population is nothing short of a national tragedy” (p. 3). A discussion in Chapter 1 on educational statistics supports Kuykendall’s belief.

According to Ravitch (2000), “Many educators still respond to students who are different in predictable ways—they isolate them, ignore them, retain them, suspend them, expel them, and in far too many instances, they fail to love them or teach them” (p. 14). When African American students are treated in the school setting in such negative ways, it is a wonder that school success can occur at all. One explanation for success experienced by African American students may be a sense of connection and belonging these youth feel towards their schools. In a study investigating African American adolescents, Taylor (1999) discovered that school belonging was significantly predictive of a student’s grade point average. Finn and Rock (1997) also observed greater school engagement for resilient adolescents. The research is not compelling, however, as several quantitative studies indicate only a moderate relationship between relatedness and

academic achievement (Connell, Spencer & Aber, 1994; Booker, 2004). Margolin (2005) found that, while strong family and peer support positively influenced African American adolescents' internalizing difficulties, support from school personnel and community members did not relate to decreased internalization difficulties.

Encouraging findings by Annunziata et al. (2006) discuss the impact that family factors have on school success for African American adolescents living in high-risk neighborhoods. The primary findings of this study indicate that a combination of parental monitoring and family cohesion promote school engagement, and that such family processes play a particularly useful role for male adolescents—countering compromising behaviors such as delinquency and antisocial behaviors. In addition to family influences, other ecological influences—external to the adolescent—have been examined as they relate to academic success. Peer contexts and aspects of the neighborhoods in which African American children are reared are topics for study, and the findings are hopeful. Peer and neighborhood influences may exert a more potent effect on the academic achievement of African American youth than that of the family (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Dornbusch, et al., 1991; Steinberg, et al., 1992), but further studies are necessary to provide more explicit conclusions. What these findings demonstrate is that there are no easy answers to the developmental achievement issues faced by African American male adolescents.

School counselors and are in a pivotal position to foster the academic achievement of African American youth. By conceptualizing factors that affect African American adolescents to include strength- and resiliency-based models (Guttman, et al.,



2002), school counselors may be able to identify and introduce culturally-relevant means of promoting academic achievement in this population.

*Sports and Extracurricular Activities – Impact on Adolescents*

Researchers have had a longstanding interest in the relationship of participation in extracurricular activities and the social outcomes, academic achievement, and educational attainment of adolescents as a result of such participation (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Several recent studies have applied Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1988) bioecological theory as a model to help understand the link between youth participation in extracurricular activities and adolescent development (Gillman, Meyers, & Perez, 2004; Huebner & Mancini, 2003), and the results are promising. According to Feldman and Matjasko (2005), benefits of participating in sports or other extracurricular school activities include carrying out the developmental tasks of adolescents such as identity exploration and the acceptance of a challenge outside of the academic arena. Researchers have also posited that participation in extracurricular activities helps adolescents develop social competencies in the form of extended supportive network of friends and adults (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1992; Kahne, et al. 2001; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992). For some adolescents who do not fare well in the classroom, sports and extracurricular activities may be the only place where they can experience success tied to a school context (Brown & Theobald, 1998). This success may provide the type of positive connection to school that, when absent, could lead to social withdrawal or poor academic attainment (Jenkins, 1997). Finally, it has been demonstrated that, among boys, the participation in football and basketball has been related to higher educational aspirations (Rees & Howell, 1990).

In a discussion pertaining specifically to adolescent participation in sports, Lynch and Levers (in press) assert, “healthy involvement in organized athletic programming can have a positive pro-social impact on youth, including fostering their self-determination and resiliency” (p. xx). By helping to connect youth with appropriate sports or extracurricular activities, school counselors can enhance the quality of services they provide. It is important that school counselors and others working with adolescents in the educational setting understand the positive impact that sports and extracurricular activities can have on adolescent development so that appropriate connections can be made between activities and youth and so that opportunities to foster self-determination, resilience, and positive social skills are not missed.

### *Community Violence*

Bearing witness to community violence has widely been recognized as a threat to the optimal development of youth (Kuther, 1999; Garbarino, 1995, 1999), and the section in Chapter 1 addressing this issue offers troubling statistics in support of this statement. This section will examine the effects that community violence has on child development. First, however, given that community violence occurs within neighborhoods, I offer remarks that address the question, Does neighborhood matter?

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (1999) formulated a report on the topic of transforming neighborhoods into family-supporting environments, with a section of the report examining the mechanisms by which neighborhoods affect child and family development and well-being. Review of social science literature determined that we can begin to understand how neighborhoods matter by becoming conscious of the role played

by the following key mechanisms (not mutually exclusive, but in combination with other factors).

- The quality of local public services, such as elementary schools, police departments, recreational facilities, child care, and health care.
- Socialization by adults outside the family with whom children interact; these individuals include role models, communal disciplinarians, and adults who help children understand what constitutes normal and acceptable behavior.
- Peer influences, especially aspirations for education and employment.
- Social networks, which help define norms of behavior and connect individuals with jobs and opportunities
- Exposure to crime and violence, which traumatizes the emotional and intellectual development of young children and creates opportunities for older children to get hurt or in trouble.
- Physical distance and isolation, especially from jobs and transportation.
- The stressors that residents encounter (both real and perceived), which can either motivate or undermine an individual; the balance between stressors and supports available to children and families, and the individuals' ability to recognize, accept, obtain, and use supports, also affect outcomes.
- Contextual factors that trigger coping mechanisms, especially short-term self-protective behaviors that may undermine long-term positive development.

Evidence from the above findings establish that there are neighborhood effects at virtually every stage of an individual's life and over a wide range of domains including education, employment, and criminal involvement (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1999,

p. 8). Findings from this report support the answer to the originally-posed question, that, indeed, neighborhoods *do* matter. This notion is further supported by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological model that takes into account the interplay between systems (e.g., neighborhoods) and their effect on the overall development of the child. Garbarino (1995) outlines in detail the "social maps" that children learn to draw in response to influences of "culture, temperament, and individual experiences that arise from social systems of family, school, neighborhood, church, community, society, and culture" (p. 23). Sadly, due, in part, to community violence, some children's social maps cause them to develop a reality where they feel "surrounded by enemies" (p. 23). With a general understanding of how neighborhoods "matter" in the lives of children and adults and how a child's social environment plays a role in how he or she views the world, I offer a discussion of the role of community violence and its impact on the development of children.

*Community Violence and Effects on Child Development.* Community violence in the United States has been recognized as a major public health concern (Centers for Disease Control, 1990; Martinez & Richters, 1993; Shalala, 1993). It is well-documented that continued exposure to violence may have a cumulative negative psychological impact on children and adolescents (Bell & Jenkins, 1993; Brown, 1992; Foy & Goguen, 1998; Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991; Root, 1992). Common responses of children and adolescents to community violence include anger, depression, increased anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and dissociation (Briere, 1995; 1995; Herman, 1992; Garbarino, 1995).

A 2006 report compiled by the Children's Defense Fund presents the following statistics:

- In 2003, 56 preschoolers were killed by firearms, compared to 52 law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty.
- More 10- to 19-year-olds die from gunshot wounds than from any other cause except motor vehicle accidents.
- Almost 90 percent of the children and teens killed by firearms in 2003 were boys.
- Boys ages 15 to 19 are nearly nine times as likely as girls of the same age to be killed by a firearm.
- In 2003, there were more than nine times as many suicides by guns among White children and teens as among Black children and teens.
- The firearm death rate for Black males ages 15 to 19 is more than four times that of White males the same age.

It should come as no surprise, then, when Garbarino (1995), a pioneer in the study of the effects of violence on youth, offers that more and more children in the United States have “a growing sense of insecurity about the world inside and outside the boundaries of their families” (p. 64). The cost to a child exposed to violence is great. In addition to the detrimental psychological issues that result, involvement with gangs, drug and alcohol abuse, and social exploitation and oppression of others, are but a few consequences of such exposure (Garbarino, 1995). Another frightening result of exposure to community violence is that “children and youth have diminished prospects for the future. Violent trauma reduces a child's confidence in life, his or her belief that life will be long” (p. 83).

Garbarino (1999) also noted that “Without future orientation there is no motivation to invest time in preparatory activities—going to school, learning new skills, delaying gratification” (p. 223).

One vision for a future with less “social toxicity” involves “mounting a national campaign to reduce childhood experience of the legitimacy of aggression, to heal the trauma of kids already victimized . . . and to detoxify the social environment . . .” (Garbarino, 1995, p. 87). School counselors and educators are in a position to help bring about change. By working to help make schools a safe environment through facilitating a positive social climate, supporting violence prevention and conflict resolution, school counselors can help adolescents redraw their “social maps.” This may allow adolescents to begin to understand that violence does *not* infiltrate every aspect of their environment and that there is reason to hope for a brighter future.

#### *Mentors – Merchants of Hope*

“Merchants of Hope” is a label given by Kuykendall (2004) to individuals who serve in a mentoring capacity. Kuykendall believes that:

. . . many individuals—regardless of life training—can educate, counsel, mentor, inspire, and impact indelibly the development of others. Those who choose to make a difference—to educate, encourage, inspire, uplift, and mentor—are marvelous Merchants of Hope (p. xv).

Many studies exist that indicate the favorable impact a meaningful non-parental adult can have on the positive development of adolescents (Cowen & Work, 1988; Garnezy, 1987; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Werner & Smith, 1987). Burton (1996) supports these findings with research that depicts the positive role grandparents have in the lives of at-risk

African American youth. Butler (2003) described how school counselors act as mentors and play a pivotal role in the lives of urban African American high school students in their endeavors towards academic success. Following are several examples of research on mentoring programs that exemplify the benefits to adolescent development.

A combined methods study conducted by Beam, et al. (2002) examined the nature of the relationship between adolescents and “very important” non-parental (VIP) adults by examining factors such as initiation, stability, change over time, frequency, content, and quality of interactions. The adolescent-VIP relationships investigated in this study were “naturally occurring” as opposed to the type of mentoring relationships that are “assigned” in programs such as Big Brothers & Big Sisters. By collecting quantitative and qualitative data through surveys and interviews with both adolescents and their VIPs, they concluded several things. First, a large majority of the adolescents under investigation had an important relationship with a non-parental adult, indicating that this may be a normative component of adolescent development. Second, the type of unique contributions that VIPs made involved a combination of adult qualities (e.g., advice giving, serving as a role model), and “peer-like” relations (e.g., being nonjudgmental and fun). Thus, VIPs appear to offer a special niche contribution to adolescent development that is different from the contributions made by parents or peers.

Bailey and Paisley (2004) provide an in-depth discussion of a mentoring project entitled Project: Gentlemen on the Move (PGOTM), a program designed to develop and nurture academic and social excellence in African American male adolescents. African American male community members serve as leaders for the program and mentors after the program has been implemented. PGOTM is a developmental and comprehensive

program, created in a high school in western North Carolina in 1989, and takes a holistic approach to the empowerment and transformation of African American male adolescents by addressing multiple aspects of their lives. Critical components of the PGOTM program include skill development for academic growth, the promotion of social development through improvement of self-efficacy, personal and business etiquette training, individual and group counseling activities, community service activities, and recreational activities. PGOTM enlists the support and assistance of families and requires that parents attend monthly meetings where they discuss issues around their participating son's academic and social performance.

After five years in existence, over 300 African American males had been on the roster for PGOTM. Many of these students went on to enjoy success in endeavors including playing in the National Football League, attending medical school, working as a software engineer with the Department of Defense, and becoming a member of the U.S. Navy. Results from one study of PGOTM indicated that regular program participants obtained higher grade point averages than did students who were referred to the program but chose not to attend (Bailey, 1995). The fundamental premise behind PGOTM is that when adolescents are provided with adequate direction, support, and opportunities, they are better able to overcome obstacles that might hinder their development. Mentors play a pivotal role in the success of the PGOTM program that targets African American male adolescents.

School counselors can have a pivotal role in developing mentoring programs within school settings or in the community setting. Helping adolescents build a positive self-identity through mentoring programs such as PGOTM can bring forth a cultural



awareness, cultivate a sense of purpose, develop self-confidence, and create a sense of belonging in African American adolescents.

### *Resiliency*

A 30-year longitudinal study of great importance regarding protective factors and resilience was conducted by Werner and Smith (1987, 1982, 1992) and traced the long-term effects of childhood adversity on the adult lives of men and women who lived in Kauai, Hawaii. Findings indicated that three clusters of protective factors existed in participants at adolescence: (a) at least average intelligence and attributes such as robustness, vigor, and an active, sociable temperament that implored positive responses from family members and strangers, (b) affectionate ties with parent substitutes such as grandparents, older siblings, and teachers that encouraged trust and autonomy, and (c) an external support system (e.g., school, church, youth group) that rewarded competence and provided participants with a sense of coherence (1989). An interesting discovery emerged during the period of adolescence in those high risk men and women who successfully overcame childhood adversities. “Their individual dispositions led them to select or construct environments that, in turn, reinforced and sustained their active, outgoing dispositions and rewarded their competencies” (p. 199). Werner and Smith’s findings can be interpreted to imply that these adolescents had a hand in creating the protective environments in which they prospered—an encouraging finding that suggests either an intrinsic response to risks or a developed self-protective skill wherein one utilizes the environment to his or her benefit. This prominent study examined the lives of an ethnic minority group and provided remarkable information regarding vulnerable adolescents; however, since the population under investigation was not African American and lived on

the Island of Kauai, Werner and Smith's findings may not be generalizable to the population under investigation here.

Another study of importance to this investigation was conducted by Howard and Johnson (2000b). In their qualitative inquiry, they compared "resilient" and "non-resilient" adolescents from a variety of schools in Australia in an attempt to discover protective factors present or lacking in each group. Results of the study indicated that the resilient students shared protective factors such as future orientation, high self-concept, and a sense of belonging and connectedness to school, while the experiences of non-resilient adolescents were almost the polar opposite (i.e., lack of future orientation, low self-concept, no sense of belonging). Findings focused exclusively on the role of schools in determining protective factors, and while Howard and Johnson's findings are insightful with respect to protective factors that exist within a school setting, the adolescents under investigation for the present study may experience protective factors that facilitate school retention but are not related to school. For the present study, it is assumed that *any* facet of an adolescent's life might provide a protective factor—a consideration that is particularly consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model of development.

Miller and McIntosh (1999) studied stress levels in 131 African American adolescents who were identified to be "at-risk" to determine if racial socialization and racial identity were mediating factors of stress. Their findings indicated that a positive racial identity can protect African American adolescents against the "discrimination and daily hassles" that they experience when attempting to perform well in school. These findings shed promising light on the integration of racial identity and socialization as protective factors for vulnerable African American adolescents; however, the study

examined these factors in relation to one indicator of stress mediation—grade point average (GPA), which may not necessarily be indicative of resiliency or a determination of school success. The present study seeks to gain insight about protective factors that empower adolescents to remain in school without their success being defined by a single factor such as GPA.

A three-year study conducted by Harvey and Hill (2004) examined resiliency through the effects of a youth and family program, the MAAT Adolescent and Family Rites of Passage Program in Washington, D.C. (the “MAAT Program”), whose participants were 57 at-risk African American adolescents. The eight-week program included elements of African culture and utilized a strength-based perspective in its application of three primary interventions: (a) an after-school component, (b) family enhancement and empowerment activities, and (c) individual and family counseling. At the conclusion of the program, statistically significant gains existed in participants’ awareness in the areas of self-esteem and participants’ knowledge about drug use. Although participants’ awareness was also increased in the areas of racial identity, culture, and academic orientation, gains in these areas were not statistically significant—a limitation of the study. Nonetheless, the study is beneficial to the literature on resiliency and protective factors in African American youth in several ways. The program took into account that treating only the at-risk youth has been found to be unsuccessful (Harrell, Cavanagh, & Sridharan, 1999), and instead implemented holistic and multifaceted interventions that considered the many systems at work in the adolescents’ lives. Grounded in an ecological framework, the program focused equal attention on the individual, the family, peer groups, and the community. The MAAT Program is an

excellent model for developing future programs since the MAAT Program includes counseling work not only with the vulnerable individual, but with the systems of which the vulnerable youth are a part. The philosophy underlying the MAAT Program mirrors the philosophy of this researcher, and the theoretical framework behind the research question under investigation in the present study is likewise supported by an ecological theoretical underpinning.

Finally, a study conducted by Maton, Hrabowski, and Greif (1998) employed qualitative methods to examine the role of family in the academic success of very high-achieving African American male adolescents. Two sets of interviews were conducted with sixty African American males who entered the Meyerhoff Scholars Program at the University of Maryland Baltimore County between 1989 and 1995. Parent interviews were also conducted utilizing a 15-question interview protocol that focused on diverse areas of family life. The results of this study found that, overall, parental factors such as academic engagement, strictness, and nurturance, taken in combination with community connectedness, appear to counteract potentially negative contextual influences such as neighborhood, peers, school, and society.

A notable distinction between the current investigation and the Maton, Hrabowski, and Greif (1998) study is the identification of “very high-achieving” African American male adolescents. Though the sample of adolescents under investigation for the current study are receiving passing marks in their classes and are academically on track to graduate, they could not be categorized as “highly achieving,” as most are taking general education classes—not advanced or college track courses.

## Summary

Research examining adolescent protective factors and resiliency has increased in recent years, yet there is still much to be learned. Of the handful of qualitative studies that have examined these topics, none has aimed to gain insight from investigating the population of African American male adolescents within the context of Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological and process-person-centered models. This study examines protective factors within these models in an attempt to answer the research question and to begin to fill the knowledge gap in this area.

This chapter provides the theoretical framework that underlies the investigation in an effort to answer the research question: What protective factors exist in certain African American male adolescents that facilitate school success? This chapter also outlines relevant research that investigates protective factors and resiliency in adolescents.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Overview of the Qualitative Inquiry

This section explicates the methodology that was used to answer the research question: What protective factors exist in African American male adolescents that facilitate and support their school success given that they reside in a high-risk environment? The very nature of the question lends itself to a qualitative inquiry, defined by Fischer (2006) as:

A reflective, interpretive, descriptive, and usually reflexive effort to understand and describe actual instances of human action and experience from the perspective of the participants' living in a situation . . . Indeed, qualitative research is intended to study human events in terms of how they are lived, which is not possible via experimental methods alone (p. 438).

My goal was to “study human events in terms of how they are lived” by investigating adolescents and their abilities to overcome adversity and hardship. Therefore, a qualitative research design was determined to be the best approach to make meaning out of the collected data on the protective factors I was interested in learning more deeply about—rich information that would not be obtainable through statistical sampling techniques.

Maxwell (2005) identifies three goals of a qualitative research design: personal goals, practical goals, and intellectual goals. Personal goals are things that motivate the researcher to conduct the study, which may or may not be important for others. My

personal goals for investigating adolescents stem partly from my work with students who have experienced or who live in the face of adversity and harsh conditions yet develop into relatively happy, well-adjusted young adults. I wish to better understand what factors exist in the lives of these young people that offer protection from living in a high-risk neighborhood, allow them to prevail over negative circumstances, not succumb to the streets, and enjoy school success. Information gleaned from this investigation informs my work as a school counselor. If it is discovered that certain protective factors relate to participants' school experiences, I may be better positioned to help facilitate these factors systemically for other students. My personal goals are intimately connected to my work with students in Hope High School. As such, I recognize the necessity to monitor any personal subjectivity that may arise while conducting this investigation. A discussion of bracketing of personal biases and assumptions is offered later in this chapter.

Practical goals are characterized by Maxwell (2005) as focusing “on *accomplishing* something—meeting some need, changing some situation, or achieving some objective” (p. 21). My central objective is to uncover results that underscore the unique perspective of adolescents while attempting to illuminate protective factors that have helped participants achieve school success. These conclusions can be used to inform school counselors and other educational practitioners in ways that may expand existing practices for the benefit of the students. A second practical goal is to advance the literature on protective factors by offering a phenomenologically-oriented approach to understanding the adolescents under investigation. There is currently little research that addresses protective factors present in minority youth from a qualitative, phenomenologically-oriented perspective.

There are five intellectual goals that Maxwell (2005) outlines for a qualitative piece of work: 1) understanding the *meaning*; 2) understanding the particular *context* within which the participants act and the influence that this context has on their actions; 3) identifying *unanticipated* phenomena and influences and generating new ideas from this information; 4) understanding the *process* by which events and actions take place; and 5) developing *causal explanations*. My aim is to address all five of these intellectual goals in Chapter 4.

According to Merriam (1988), qualitative research entails the following five assumptions:

1. Qualitative researchers are concerned primarily with process, rather than outcomes or products.
2. Qualitative researchers are interested in meaning – how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and their structures of the world.
3. Qualitative research involves fieldwork. The researcher physically goes to the people, setting, site, or institution to observe or record behavior in its natural setting.
4. Qualitative research is descriptive in that the researcher is interested in process, meaning, and understanding gained through words or pictures.
5. The process of qualitative research is inductive in that the researcher builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses and theories from details (p. 19-20).

Thus, qualitative methodology is an appropriate way to understand the phenomenon being studied from the perspective of the individual in the natural setting. In this study,



it served as a way to examine the meanings that African American male adolescents attach to their ability to overcome problems or hard times and enjoy school success.

Finally, a qualitative study suits me best personally for the following reasons. I consider myself fundamentally people-oriented in nature, and I like to learn about people's experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, knowledge, and how people make meaning of their lives. Conducting a phenomenologically-oriented body of research allows me to conduct my research from a perspective that best suits my interests and personality.

### Lived Experience and Lived Meaning

Of the many traditions of qualitative examination available, a phenomenologically-oriented inquiry is the primary methodology employed here because it answers the fundamental question: What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this group of people? "Essence" is defined by Patton (2002) as "the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced" (p. 106). Adolescents who participated in this study share the common experience of residing in a high-risk neighborhood and enjoying school success. Their stories offer rich and evocative information that get at the 'essence' of the protective factors present in their lives. Co-researchers' insights helped contribute to a depth of understanding by thoughtfully sharing their experiences in a way that allowed me to begin to make meaning of their life stories.

Van Manen (1997) answers the question "What is 'lived meaning?'" this way:

Lived meaning refers to the way that a person experiences and understands his or her world as real and meaningful. Lived meanings

describe those aspects of a situation as experienced by the person in it (p. 183).

For the purposes of this study, I sought to extrapolate the ‘lived meaning’ of those African American male adolescents who reside in a high-risk environment yet have been able to enjoy school success by endeavoring to understand their stories. Van Manen (1997) believes that “lived experience” stories attempt to mirror what a novel provides a reader, namely, “the chance of living through an experience that provides us with the opportunity of gaining insight into certain aspects of the human condition” (p. 70). My goal was to gain insights into the protective factors that exist in the lives of the adolescents under investigation that facilitate and support their school success.

#### *Van Manen’s Four Existentials*

As guides for reflection in the research process, van Manen (1997) provides four fundamental lifeworld themes that he denotes as “existentials.” They are: lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived human relation (relationality or communality). Each of the four existentials represents a segment that, when taken as a whole, comprise how all human beings experience the world. *Lived space* refers to “felt space” –best described in terms of the feeling we get when in a particular space. A good example, provided by van Manen (1997), is the feeling we get when we are at home. The home, “reserves a very special space experience which has something to do with the fundamental sense of our being” (p. 102). Though difficult to describe in words, most people experience a certain feeling when they think about the meaning behind the word “home,” and though each of our reactions to “home” means something completely different based on our individual experiences, we universally share

some type of feeling, either positive or negative, around this word. That feeling is an example of van Manen's "lived space." *Lived body* refers to the fact that "we are always bodily in the world" (p. 103). The example van Manen offers to describe lived body is the awkward physical reaction people sometimes have when being looked upon with a critical gaze. This is compared with the body's reaction to an admiring gaze, which can result in the body surpassing "its usual grace and its normal abilities" (p. 104). *Lived time* is described as "subjective time"—not clock time. Lived time is a compilation of all of the memories of the past and the effects that those memories have on the way an individual carries him or herself, adopted gestures, spoken words, and so forth. In addition to the past shaping a person's lived time, the influences and pressures of the present add to an individual's development, as does a person's future orientation experienced through hopes, aspirations and the "expectations we have . . . on life to come" (p. 104). Finally, *lived other* is "the lived relation we maintain with others in the interpersonal space that we share with them" (p. 104). Lived other can be viewed as the way in which another individual "is physically present to us."

These four existentials, according to van Manen (1997), "can be differentiated but not separated." When taken together, these existentials make up who we are as individuals and help explain how we come to view our personal lived experiences. The foregoing four existentials provide a useful framework that helps to define and shape the lived experiences of the co-researchers under investigation for this study.

## Research Design

### *Purposeful Selection of Participants*

Purposeful selection (Light, et al., 1990) was used to select co-researchers—the adolescents—for this study. Each of the participants met the following selection criteria: (a) they are an African American male between the ages of 15 and 19, (b) they resided in Milltown at the time of their interview, (c) they are currently enrolled in Hope High School, and (d) they are academically on track to graduate on time from high school.

Maxwell (2005) listed several goals for utilizing purposeful selection. Two deserve mention as they relate to this study. The first relates to “achieving representativeness” or “typicality of the settings, individuals, or activities selected” (p. 89). Given that the five co-researchers in this study all live in the same high-risk neighborhood environment, are of the same race, and attend the same high school, Maxwell offers that the conclusions about the protective factors in these adolescents would more “adequately represent the average members of the population” than would a random sample (p. 89). Another goal of purposeful sampling is opposite the first—by gathering data from five unique individuals, heterogeneity within the population under study allows for a “range” of variation in what is uncovered. Maxwell notes that “the tradeoff between this approach and selecting a more homogeneous sample is that you have less data about any particular kind . . . and will not be able to say as much in depth about typical instances” (p. 90). For the purposes of my investigation, participants were selected based on the fact that they all reside in a high-risk neighborhood yet all enjoy school success.

## *Procedures*

A letter from me was mailed to qualifying adolescents that introduced my research study and invited individuals to participate in the study as research subjects. The letter explained the nature and purpose of the study, participants' right to withdraw at any time, confidentiality, a statement about risks and benefits of participation, and my intent to audiotape individual interview sessions and later destroy tapes at the completion of the study. For participants who were minors, consent forms were provided that required a signature by a parent or guardian in addition to the assent forms that were required to be signed by the minor participants. After all consent/assent forms were returned from the co-researchers, I began scheduling individual interviews, a task that proved to be more difficult than first anticipated. My initial idea was to schedule individual interviews at the end of the co-researchers' school day. Several times, presumably in their excitement to get home after a long day at school, students forgot to keep their scheduled appointments and got on their buses. They then had to be rescheduled. Three of the co-researchers were on the high school basketball team. At the start of the data collection process, it appeared that the end of basketball season was near. I scheduled these three interviews with the end of the basketball season in mind. Happily for these players, the team made it to the playoff rounds, which meant that after-school hours were devoted to team practices in preparation for their next important game. Interviews had to be rearranged several times to accommodate these boys' victories as they continued to progress through the playoffs. My expectations were that once the consent/assent forms were returned, data collection would go relatively quickly. In actuality, data collection was a slow process that occurred over several weeks time.

## *Methods*

The data for this piece of research were the narratives and insights of participating African American male adolescents collected individually using semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. The interview data were recorded using audiotape and handwritten notes, and later organized thematically for interpretation (See Data Analysis, Chapter IV). The interviews were structured to some degree by utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol (See Appendix A), though the schedule was intended to be used more as a guide and reminder than as a strict set of questions. The schedule served as a prompt to help elicit and stimulate the co-researchers' stories about salient events and insights regarding problems or hard times they had experienced, persons or things that had helped them cope with any problems, and experiences and successes while in high school. An advantage of utilizing an interview guide, according to Patton (2002), is that "the interviewer remains free to build conversation within a particular subject area, to work questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style but with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined" (p. 343). I added many spontaneous questions to all the interviews in response to insights provided by participants in an effort to glean even more in-depth and insightful data. At the same time, I was able to maintain a degree of consistency, by using the semi-structured protocol, across all interviews.

The interview schedule was divided into the following sections; each related to the overall research question but meant to investigate the question from different aspects of the co-researchers' history, experiences, and level of understanding. These sections were:

- General information and background

- Discourse on Problems or Hard Times Experienced
- Discourse on What or Who Helped During Hard Times
- High School Experience
- Discourse on What or Who Helped Throughout High School
- Discussion about Future

The semi-structured interview guide was developed specifically to guide co-researchers through many dimensions of their everyday lived experiences and to create an open space for co-researchers to freely retell their life stories. My role in the interview process was to elicit information, in the least obstructive way, in an effort to gain insight into the co-researchers' backgrounds, thoughts, worldviews, experiences, and assumptions relative to the research question.

### *Instrumentation*

Instrumentation in qualitative study is unique when compared with that used in traditional scientific research. In qualitative inquiries, the researcher becomes the primary instrument by asking the interview questions, taking notes, making observations of persons and environments, and interpreting responses and results. Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to the “theoretical sensitivity” of the researcher—a useful concept used to evaluate a researcher’s ability and readiness to conduct a qualitative inquiry.

Theoretical sensitivity refers to a personal quality of the researcher. It indicates an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data. . . .[It] refers to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the

capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn't (Strauss & Corbin, p. 42).

The acquisition of theoretical sensitivity comes from a number of sources including professional experiences, professional literature, and personal experiences. The credibility of a piece of qualitative research relies on the confidence readers have in the researcher's ability to make appropriate decisions in the field and to be sensitive to the data (Eisner, 1991; Patton, 2002). Given that I am the primary instrumentation for this study, I offer the following comments regarding my experience, training, and qualifications that support my theoretical sensitivity.

I have had a longstanding personal interest in my research topic that preceded my academic interest. For seven years, I have provided counseling services to adolescents in both formal and informal settings within the school environment. I have taken a keen interest in learning more about those students who manage to rise above the hardships and difficulties experienced within their home or community environments.

After having earned a Master's degree in education with a major in school counseling, and after having attended a plethora of professional conferences, workshops, and in-service days whose focus was on adolescent behavioral, developmental, cultural, and mental health issues, I feel sufficiently qualified to conduct this research study. I am comfortable working with the population under investigation, and consider myself to have an expertise in adolescent development. A significant amount of time spent with adolescents has helped me to learn effective ways in which to interact, connect, and build rapport and trusting relationships with them. Experiences and skills are an advantageous part of the interview process. As Patton (2002) emphasizes, "The quality of the



information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer” (p. 341).

In addition to sufficient training, a high level of self-awareness and political and cultural consciousness is necessary when conducting qualitative research so that the instrument—the researcher—is constantly aware of and can bracket biases and personal perspectives. Hoepfl (1997) asserts that qualitative researchers have a special responsibility to their subjects and to their readers.

Since there are no statistical tests for significance in qualitative studies, the researcher bears the burden of discovering and interpreting the importance of what is observed, and of establishing a plausible connection between what is observed and the conclusions drawn in the research report (p. 61).

Acknowledging biases or assumptions that may arise throughout my data analysis and prudently reflecting on, processing, drawing conclusions, and reporting such discoveries allows me to be fair to the study and to the co-researchers under investigation and creates greater trustworthiness and authenticity for the study.

#### *Data Collection and Recording*

Cresswell (1998) reports that the process of collecting information for a phenomenological study primarily involves in-depth interviews with up to 10 individuals; Dukes (1984) recommends studying 3 to 10 individuals, though the number of subjects is less important than the description of meaning of a small number of individuals who have experienced the same phenomena (Cresswell, p. 123). Patton (2002) shares that the purpose of interviewing is:

. . . to allow us to enter the other person's perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, to gather their stories (p. 341).

In an effort to best "enter the other person's perspective," certain questions were developed to help illuminate the protective factors that exist in the lives of my co-researchers. My co-researchers' answers to these questions helped me to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of certain African American male adolescents who, in the face of problems or hard times, have demonstrated resiliency and have enjoyed school success.

In addition to the co-researchers' individual interviews, each was asked to complete a short survey eliciting demographic information such as the number of years the co-researcher has resided in Milltown, the individuals with whom the co-researchers live, and so forth. Finally, my personal observations of the co-researchers before, during, and after the interviews were noted, and my impressions regarding co-researchers' levels of insight, personality, non-verbal communications, and notable non-occurrences during interviews was noted. This triangulation of data collection has strengthened the reliability and credibility of the study. Credibility depends less on sample size than on the richness of the information gathered and on the analytical abilities of the researcher, and can be enhanced through triangulation of data (Patton, 2002).

### *Data Processing and Analysis*

The data processing and analysis includes a discussion of the practical aspects of what I did after collecting data followed by a discussion of how I went about interpreting my data with an eye on identify emergent themes.

At the conclusion of each taped interview session, co-researchers' names were masked, and interviews were transcribed verbatim with identifying information omitted and unnecessary non-language utterances (e.g., "um", "ah") and the majority of fillers (e.g., "you know what I mean") deleted. Next, marginal notations were made that helped identify tentative thematic categories. A system of coding was developed whereby each printed transcript, demographic survey, and notes from my personal observations were assigned identifying notations for ease of categorization. Collecting data while simultaneously analyzing it is suggested by Merriam (2001) as a way to avoid being unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelmed by the volume of data that accumulates in a qualitative study. Hill, et al. (1997) offered that delineating step-by-step stages of data analysis is a useful way to organize the task of data analysis. For this study, the following analytic steps were applied and are discussed fully in Chapter 4: (a) identification of themes, (b) core ideas, (c) audit of core ideas, and (d) cross analysis.

The final step in data analysis is the attempt to make meaning from what is found in the data. Patton (2000) asserts, "Interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, making sense of findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences . . . and otherwise imposing order on an unruly but surely patterned world" (p. 480). Analysis and interpretation of the findings for this

study were made, in part, through anecdotal narrative. Van Manen (1997) expressed that the significance of anecdotal narratives is found in its power to do the following:

- (1) *to compel*: a story recruits our willing attention;
- (2) *to lead us to reflect*: a story tends to invite us to a reflective search for significance;
- (3) *to involve us personally*: one tends to search actively for the story teller's meaning via one's own;
- (4) *to transform*: we may be touched, shaken, moved by story; it teaches us;
- (5) *to measure one's interpretive sense*: one's response to a story is a measure of one's deepened ability to make interpretive sense (p. 121).

My hope is that, as interpreter of the stories shared by co-researchers involved in this study, my anecdotal narratives effectively support my interpretation of the significance of the stories and the meaning behind the stories that were expressed to me.

According to Patton (2002), the analysis and interpretation phase begins after the data collection has formally ended, and the researcher has two primary sources to draw from in organizing the analysis: "(1) the questions that were generated during the conceptual and design phases of the study, prior to the fieldwork, and (2) the analytic insights and interpretations that emerged during data collection" (p. 437). The research question that was developed prior to fieldwork and that drove the study was: What protective factors exist in African American male adolescents that facilitate or support their school success given that they reside in a high-risk neighborhood? The analytic insights and interpretations that emerged during data collection came directly out of the responses co-researchers shared in response to the interview questions. These analytic

insights and interpretations are outlined in this Chapter and in Chapter V. Also in this chapter, I present descriptive information for the five co-researchers who participated in this study. The purpose of these descriptions is to take the reader into the co-researchers' experiences through information gleaned from co-researcher interviews and from my own personal observations. These descriptions are meant to give the reader a sense of the unique qualities of each participant.

As mentioned in the literature review, there are two theoretical frameworks that helped in constructing this study: self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; 2006) and bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). During the analysis of the data, these frameworks, co-researchers' insights, and my personal observations triangulate to help uncover the protective factors that facilitate and support certain African American male adolescents to achieve school success despite their residence in a high-risk neighborhood. Finally, the methodological approach to this study, grounded in a lived-experience perspective (van Manen, 1990), was significant in organizing and structuring the data. As ethical considerations are imperative in any piece of research involving human subjects, the following section outlines how ethical considerations were addressed for this study.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Many authors have discussed the importance of ethical issues in conducting qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 2002). Most importantly, the researcher has an obligation to respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of the participants under investigation. In this study, the following strategies were implemented to protect the rights of the co-researchers:

1. The objectives of the study were communicated to co-researchers in writing and again verbally so that they clearly understood the purpose of the study and their role as participants in the study.
2. Written permission was obtained in the form of consent or assent forms from all co-researchers. Co-researchers were made aware that their participation was voluntary and that they could choose to stop participation at any time.
3. Verbatim transcriptions, written interpretations, and summaries were made available to all participants.
4. Co-researchers' names were masked, and pseudonyms were used for the town in which co-researchers live and the school in which co-researchers attend. This helped to protect the privacy and preserve the anonymity of the co-researchers.
5. Information shared by a co-researcher was not discussed with other co-researchers in the study.

### *Data Analysis*

Part of the challenge of data analysis in a qualitative inquiry is that no precise formula exists that outlines specific steps on transforming data into findings (Patton, 2002). Guidelines and examples are plentiful, but because each qualitative inquiry is unique, the analytic approach used in each study is also unique, as is the manner in which each inquirer interprets the data. Data analysis ultimately “depends, at every stage, on the skills, training, insights, and capabilities of the inquirer” (Patton, p. 433). Data analysis involves bringing order, structure, and meaning to a voluminous collection of data that

accumulates in qualitative studies. Analysis of the data in this study was based on procedures provided by several qualitative authors (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In qualitative studies, data collection and analysis occur concurrently. Analysis begins immediately after finishing the first interview or observation, and the researcher continues to analyze the data throughout the collection process, the transcription process, and the eventual analysis process. Continually processing one's thoughts and analyses allows the researcher to identify salient categories and themes. Guided by initial concepts, the researcher can adjust or abandon ideas as further data are collected and transcribed. In the analysis for this study, individual case descriptions are introduced as a way to organize the analysis.

*Data Analysis: Research Procedures.* I began the data analysis process by transcribing the five individual interviews verbatim. This resulted in over seventy pages of transcriptions. Though the process was tedious and extremely time consuming, it was, at the same time, stimulating and interesting. I began coding procedures early, as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Bogden and Biklen (1998). Coding is a process of sorting and categorizing the data to capture meaning, occurrences, and any emerging patterns in the data.

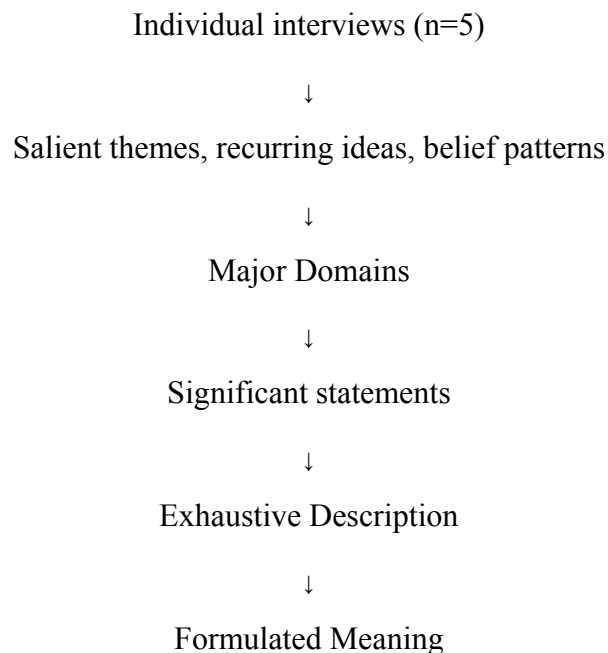
Interview transcripts were coded by breaking down the data into smaller pieces of information. I began this process by reading the transcripts and then rereading them while simultaneously marking any salient themes, recurring ideas, or belief patterns that were provided by the co-researchers. I marked every possible coding label that arose in white space or in margins on the transcripts. I then began extracting significant statements or phrases that supported the categories or themes that addressed the research question

under investigation, What protective factors exist in the lives of African American male adolescents that facilitate school success? I noted specific topics that emerged from the data for each individual interview. These topics included themes such as involvement in sports, family factors, educational factors, peer factors, and other resources. Table 2 — Ecological Protective Factors—highlights themes as “major domains” and identifies core ideas that emerged within each major domain in corresponding columns to the right of the major domain. The information in this table is discussed later in the chapter as it relates to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 2005) bioecological model.

The next step in the analysis of data was to produce an exhaustive description of co-researchers’ experiences from the major domain categories. According to Patton (1990, p. 3), an “exhaustive description” goes beyond mere fact or surface appearance but stops short of becoming “trivial and mundane.” An exhaustive description should communicate the “voices, feelings, actions, and meanings” of the individuals under investigation. The exhaustive descriptions provided for each co-researcher in this study summarize co-researchers’ lived experiences and utilize their own words to help depict what or who co-researchers perceived as being helpful during difficult or hard times. Finally, a discussion at the end of each summary of analysis attempts to attribute meaning to the experiences of co-researchers. This step “moves from what the participants said to what they meant” (Forrest, 1989, p. 817). It involves the researcher being cognizant of contextual factors that modify the meaning of verbatim transcription of the interviews as well as the researcher bracketing biases and assumptions in an effort to remain true to the data. Once I felt comfortable that my major domains were complete and lacked ambiguity, I compared identified themes with factors that corresponded to the three



fundamental needs discussed in Ryan and Deci's (2000, 2006) self-determination theory. This information is presented in the form of a graphic chart at the conclusion of each co-researcher's analysis. I organized these charts into two columns. The first column indicates the three fundamental needs identified as part of self-determination theory—autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Personal and ecological characteristics of co-researchers that fit within these categories are listed correspondingly in a right-handed column of each chart. The purpose of creating this type of chart for each co-researcher was to explore similarities and differences across co-researchers as they related to the research question and as they fit into the theoretical model applied to this study. Using the three fundamental needs of self-determination theory as a guide allowed me to organize the results of my data analysis in a coherent and logical way. Analysis of data proceeded through the stages outlined in Figure 1 below:



*Figure 1.* Flow Chart of Data Analysis

*Co-Researchers' Demographics.* The data that were collected for this study came from five African American male adolescents, all between the ages of 15 and 19. All five co-researchers reside in Milltown, an urban community that is considered to be high-risk. All five co-researchers had attended Hope High School for at least one full academic school year, and all are on track to graduate on time. I met individually with each of the five co-researchers over a period of several weeks and conducted a semi-structured personal interview with each that lasted up to an hour in length. It was important to protect the identity of the individual participants, the town in which they reside, and the high school in which they attend, and all participants received assurance that their privacy would be maintained. Therefore, aliases have been used in place of participants' real names. The name of co-researchers' neighborhood and the name of their high school have also been assigned pseudonyms.

All of the interviews were conducted in the school counseling office within Hope High School at least a half hour after school had been dismissed for the day. This decision was made so that students and faculty in the school had sufficient time to leave the building for the day prior to the start of the interviews. The school counseling office is a quiet location within the high school that is relatively free from distractions—an essential necessity given that the interviews were audiotaped. The office is also familiar to the co-researchers which, I believed, would be helpful in allowing them to feel more comfortable throughout the interview process.

#### Methodological Assumptions and Researcher's Biases

As the sole researcher for this study, I offer several assumptions and biases that I had prior to my data collection. I am a White, 40-year old, female, doctoral candidate. As

such, I had an assumption that my co-researchers may not respond to me as an individual who was particularly able to understand or appreciate their life circumstances. What I found while conducting my research was quite the opposite. My co-researchers were calm, comfortable, trusting, and interested in my questions, and I did not feel that my race, gender, or age interfered in any way with my co-researchers' ability to provide meaningful insight into their lived experiences. This level of trust and comfort may be due, in part, to the fact that my co-researchers knew me and had a pre-existing relationship with me prior to their taped interview sessions. This may have provided the adolescents with a sense of security while working with me that may not have existed had they been interviewed by a total stranger.

I did not fully expect that adolescents would be able to tap into deep insights about their life experiences. This bias stems primarily from the fact that much of my work with adolescents is solution-focused and brief due to time limitations within the confines of a school day. Hence, I do not typically experience adolescents who offer deep, relevant meaning to their personal experiences. What I found while collecting my data proved to be quite the opposite of my assumption. My co-researchers attached deep, thoughtful, rich meaning to their experiences and were able to articulate quite thoroughly the significance that they ascribed to experiences such as growing up in a high-risk neighborhood and being exposed to harsh circumstances, drugs, and crime. I would again offer that my co-researchers may have felt comfortable sharing intimate and thorough details of their lives because of a level of trust that existed prior to their interviews with me. Additionally, there was not a time limitation placed on my interviews with these adolescents. This allowed them to share freely and provide much more information in this

forum than they typically would be able to during school-day discussions. Garbarino (1995), who studied matters of acceptance, affirmation, and accountability in adolescents living in toxic environments, stated, "In a sense, acceptance lies in being taken seriously and treated as a competent person" (p. 91). Perhaps the level of enthusiasm and insight expressed by the five young men during our interviews was the result of having the opportunity to share their stories with someone who took them seriously, accepted them, treated them as competent individuals, and was genuinely interested in listening to what they had to share.

### Limitations

Personal observations, individual interviews, and documentation offered multiple perspectives in my attempt to answer the research question driving this study, and using a combination of data types served to increase the study's validity. Nonetheless, limitations to this study still exist, partly by design. A primary limitation of my research is that my findings are based on my personal interpretation of the data. Another researcher might interpret the same data in a completely different way. In my attempt to present my co-researchers' stories in the most genuine and authentic light, I was very thoughtful and reflective when interpreting the data, and I worked judiciously to construct a piece of research that fully embodied my co-researchers' perspectives and lived experiences, albeit from the only point of view that I can offer.

There exists a limitation to my study because my expertise does not encompass the area of disadvantaged neighborhoods. Though I have visited Milltown on many occasions and am very familiar with the neighborhood, my familiarity is from an outsider's perspective only. I did not grow up in a disadvantaged neighborhood, nor do I

currently live in a disadvantaged neighborhood. My description of Milltown, therefore, may be viewed as biased since it was written through the eyes of someone with no substantive firsthand experience or expertise of economically-disadvantaged neighborhoods.

An additional limitation is the inherent lack of generalizability of the findings of a phenomenologically-oriented study. This lack of generalizability is viewed by van Manen (1997) as a positive aspect of phenomenologically-oriented research because, he believed, “The tendency to generalize may prevent us from developing understandings that remain focused on the uniqueness of human experience” (p. 22). The inability to generalize is outweighed by the fresh insights provided by co-researchers whose stories begin to illuminate the meaning of school success—meaning that can allow school counselors and other educators “to act more thoughtfully and more tactfully in certain situations” (p. 23) when working with this particular population of youth.

A further limitation to this study may exist because I, as the researcher, was known to the adolescents under study. I wonder if answers provided would have been different in some way had the questions been presented by a person unknown to the co-researchers. My personal viewpoint contradicts this potential limitation, as I believe it is *because* the adolescents knew me that they were able to answer so fully and thoughtfully without a shyness or reservation that may have existed if they were sharing their stories with a stranger.

Finally, a limitation exists because of the small sample size. With only five individuals, the generalizability of findings is limited. Broad statements cannot be made about protective factors present in the lives of African American male adolescents.

## Summary

There is a tremendous benefit in listening to the voices of resilient and inspirational adolescents. For school counselors and others working within educational systems, it is important to consider the contribution of students who have managed to overcome adversities. The adolescents themselves can inform us best about their lived experiences, and can offer perspectives about the protective factors that have successfully brought them through their adversities. Gaining an understanding of resiliency and protective factors from the viewpoint of adolescents provides opportunities to reevaluate and reflect upon current preconceptions or misconceptions about a specific at-risk population—a first step in the development of or alteration to programming and policies whose aim should be to address the needs of adolescents generally.

This chapter described the methodology utilized to get at the meaning underlying the research question: What protective factors exist in certain African American male adolescents that facilitate their school success?

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This chapter is concerned with presenting the data that were collected through demographic information, individual interviews, and personal observations and interactions with five African American male adolescents who all reside in the same high-risk neighborhood and who are all enjoying school success. Peshkin (2000) discussed the nature of data analysis in qualitative research and outlined the following conceptualizations about interpretation that guided his research: (a) interpretation is grounded in the wonderings, questions, and ideas that have been present from the outset of the investigation; (b) analysis of data emerges from a vantage point determined by how the researcher chooses to look at the phenomenon; (c) interpretation of data relates to the researcher's decisions about what data to collect in light of hypotheses about the experiences being researched; (d) analysis is related to what the researcher chooses to write that substantiates the research hypotheses; and, (e) interpretation is a way to account for what the researcher learned through his or her interactions with co-researchers, their stories, and other data gathered through the research. The findings for this study are offered with the above assumptions about the interpretive process in mind.

#### Organizing the Findings

The main themes that emerged from the combined individual interviews are presented next. After a summary of each individual interview, I reflected on the emergent themes taking into consideration the theoretical models that frame this study: self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; 2006) and bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). The findings of this inquiry are organized into five major

domains and core ideas relating to ecological protective factors (Table 2), supported by Bronfenbrenner’s theoretical scaffolding. Major domains that emerged as a result of data analysis are: involvement in sports, family factors, educational factors, peer factors, and other resources. Core ideas that correspond to each major domain are identified in the corresponding column of Table 2. Following the introduction of each co-researcher, I will discuss findings as they relate to Ryan and Deci’s (2000, 2006) self-determination theory. Finally, after presentation of all five co-researchers, I offer a discussion connecting my findings with the bioecological model.

Table 2

*Ecological Protective Factors*

<i>MAJOR DOMAINS</i>	<i>CORE IDEAS</i>
Meaningful Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Basketball</li> <li>● Football</li> </ul>
Family Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Attachment to Parental/Guardian</li> <li>● Attachment to extended family members</li> <li>● Parent/Guardian’s involvement in adolescent’s life</li> </ul>
Educational Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Commitment to school</li> <li>● Aspirations to attend college</li> <li>● Parent/Guardian expectations for adolescent to attend college</li> </ul>
Peer Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Positive influence</li> <li>● Shared interests</li> <li>● Provides empathy, support</li> </ul>
Other Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Self-Esteem</li> <li>● Future orientation</li> <li>● Religious beliefs</li> <li>● Assuming a role model or leadership position</li> <li>● Close relationship to adult outside the family</li> <li>● Hopefulness for future</li> </ul>



## Individual Interviews: The Adolescents

There were five African American male adolescents who participated in individual interviews for this study. This section provides a detailed summary of the lived experiences of these adolescents and the protective factors that exist in their lives that have helped facilitate or support their school success.

### *Individual Interview 1: Cornell, "I'm about basketball!"*

The time I spent interviewing Cornell proved to be enlightening and informative. A number of core ideas, including basketball, educational aspirations, peer factors, future orientation, a close relationship with at least one adult, and a close relationship with friends, emerged as protective factors during my interview with Cornell.

Cornell reported on time to his scheduled interview, which took place late in the afternoon after basketball practice. Cornell entered the school counselor's office and brought with him tremendous energy and a striking presence. He is six feet, four inches tall and has a large frame that supports a physically fit body. Cornell was dressed in a clean, black t-shirt with a white t-shirt peeking out from underneath. He was wearing the popular trend of enormously oversized jeans, and his tennis shoes were pristine white. Cornell was well-groomed with a short, neat hairstyle. He has enormously-expressive large brown eyes and a happy-go-lucky personality that showed itself throughout our interview. Cornell settled into his seat quickly and appeared to be very comfortable at the start of and throughout our interview. He easily maintained eye contact, seemed eager to share his story, and gave me the sense that he had no difficulties interacting with adults.

When I began by asking Cornell to tell me about himself, he shared some important demographic information such as where he originally lived, his age when he

moved to Milltown, and so forth. What struck me most about his introduction of himself was that, almost immediately, Cornell mentioned basketball. He shared that he and his friends enjoyed “hanging out,” and when I asked what that involves, he responded by saying, among other things, “goin’ to play basketball, watchin’ college basketball on t.v. . . .” As we progressed through the interview, it was obvious to me that basketball is omnipresent in Cornell’s life and is a significant facet of his identity.

Difficulties that Cornell shared about his adolescent years included moving six times within a one year period over a four block area, and having the cable and electric turned off at various times, because, as Cornell expressed, “we live paycheck to paycheck” and are “on welfare. We get food stamps and everything.” Cornell lives with his mother, a younger brother, two younger sisters, an aunt who does not work, and a younger cousin. He acknowledged that he lives in a crack-infested neighborhood, offering, “So he (a crack dealer) lives directly above me and there’s people comin’ through there (Cornell’s yard) every day, constantly. Constantly. . . . it’s like they’re constantly movin’ and you see everyone standin’ outside on the corner. The police is constantly drivin’ around our block.” Though this activity seems pervasive on Cornell’s street, he reports that he never feels unsafe, “Cause I know everybody, and everybody know me.” Despite feeling a sense of security for himself while living in this environment, Cornell reports that he has had his house broken into and has had things stolen from his bedroom. He commented that his safety was never compromised, despite the break-in, concluding, “It had to be one of these crackheads around here, runnin’ around, tryin’ to sell somethin’ to the dealer . . .” Cornell reports that, especially during summer months, he is often approached by people not from Milltown asking if he knows

where they can buy drugs. He shared, “It’s like, come on man, just ‘cause I’m big and Black don’t mean I’m sellin’ something. And it get frustrating sometimes . . .”

Cornell feels a sense of obligation to protect his younger brother from falling victim to the streets. He recalls that when he was younger, “My mom used to have me in the house by the streetlight,” but that now, “My mom’s a little more lenient on my brother ‘cause we been here for awhile,” and though Cornell reports that his mom knows what goes on, “. . . she don’t see it like *I* see it because everybody my age is doin’ that—sellin’ drugs and out on the corner late night, drinkin’ and all that other stuff. And I’m just tryin’ to keep my brother away from it.” When I asked Cornell how he has managed to keep himself out of the problem when it was literally walking through his front yard on a daily basis, his response: “Basketball!” Cornell acknowledged the influence and intervention of a good friend when, at times, he has felt a pull towards the streets, stating, “. . . he pulled me, like, ‘come on, man, let’s go play basketball.’ Now that we playin’ basketball, I don’t have no time to do that.” Cornell also shared that he has friends who sell drugs who “watch out for me. They tell me, ‘ya know nigga’ you don’t need to be doin’ that,” and go as far as to say, “if I *see* you doin’ it, we gonna have some problems.” Cornell is able to rectify this issue by viewing it this way. “They keep me out of trouble. I feel like my friends do it enough for me. I don’t have to do it. They do it.”

When asked if anyone in addition to the aforementioned friend has helped Cornell get through any of the tough times, he shared that his parents are “definitely keepin’ my head right.” Even though his dad lives in another state, Cornell has regular phone contact with him. Cornell shared that even though his mother works hard to try to make ends meet, “my mom’s main thing is for me to come to school, get a good education, and go to

college.” After sharing some of the hardships and responsibilities that his mother endures, Cornell offered what I found to be a very touching demonstration of the mother-son bond that he shares with his mother. “She’ll come downstairs in my room and talk to me, ‘How your day goin’? How you doin’? What you doin’? That helps out a lot.’”

Another person who has had a significant influence on Cornell’s ability to experience success in school is his basketball coach. Acting as a role model, disciplinarian, and father-figure to Cornell, his coach is “the one tellin’ me, I mean, I gotta calm down. He tell me the team look up to me. A lot of people look up to me, and I gotta set an example so, I try, I try.” Later in the interview, the subject of Cornell’s coach came up again when I asked what it was specifically about the relationship Cornell has had with people who have helped him to deal with difficulties.

Um [long pause]. It’s always, everything always relates to basketball with me. Anybody know me, that’s all I am, is, I’m about basketball. That’s it. So anytime I have had a problem, it’s kinda been on the court and, like . . . Coach, or it’d be a teacher tellin’ me, ‘you doin’ this wrong.’ So I feel like I’m closer to Coach, sometimes, than I am to my parents. ‘Cause my dad is in Detroit. I don’t really see him. My mom is working now . . . so, like, when I come in, she sleep, or when she come in, I’m sleep, or I’m not there. So, it’s like, I spend most of my time at school, with Coach, so. He would probably be the one with the most special relationship with me, is Coach. Ya know, keepin’ me in line. Keepin’ me straight. Every time I come to school, he jumpin’ on me, make sure I got my homework done. So, Coach is the one . . . he knows that my dad’s not here. So he kinda’,

I'm not sayin' he's tryin' to *be* my dad, but he's, he's there. He always tellin' me, 'I'm there if you need me.' If I need anything, just talk to him.

Throughout Cornell's discourse about his basketball coach, it was obvious to me that his feelings were genuine and heartfelt. At times, it seemed that all of Cornell's responses might have a basketball theme, and he was very adept at relating each question I posed back to his passion for the game. When at one point I asked, "What did people say or do that you viewed as helpful?," the following dialogue transpired:

Cornell: Stay focused. Stay on top of my, uh, stay on task. Uh, [long pause]. I would say that that's mainly, that's it. Like I said, everything is related to basketball so, it's like, if I'm ever havin' a bad day, if I pick up a basketball, all that go away. It's not there no more. I'm not worried about nothin' else. Basketball is my way out.

CT: Really? It's that therapeutic for you?

Cornell: Yeah. It's just . . . That's what I do. If I'm mad at home, my, the basketball court is right above my house. I grab my ball, and I'm gone for hours, playin' basketball.

CT: By yourself?

Cornell: By myself. . . That's just how I relieve myself. That's it. I don't go outside and scream. I don't fight nobody. I go to the basketball court and I take it out on the rim [laugh]. That's how I do it!

By his own admission, Cornell's identity with basketball was established early on. Cornell was part of the group of students who had a choice of high schools they

wished to attend since the district in which he lived did not have its own high school. There were three choices to pick from. Cornell reports that when he was in eighth grade, a high school basketball coach approached his teachers who began pressuring Cornell to attend a certain high school as a “basketball recruit.” Cornell recalls, “I wasn’t lookin’ at no other schools at all ‘cause they were like, this is where we need you. You’re comin’ to [school name]. I even got a varsity jacket, one of the team jackets, in eighth grade . . . And I felt like I was big and bad, couldn’t nobody stop me.” The affect of having a high school basketball coach recruit Cornell as an eighth grade student bore out in his ninth grade grades. He entered ninth grade with the mindset that, “You can’t say nothin’ to me. I’m a freshman. I’m startin’ varsity, ya know, I don’t wanna hear it. You cannot touch me. Head got real big. Freshman year. I didn’t do nothin’.” Cornell then shared what he describes as one of the most difficult experiences of his young life. Academically, he did little to no work and admitted that his teachers passed him because of his position on the team. When he returned to tenth grade with the “same attitude,” he encountered a teacher who would not pass him based on his athletic talents. Cornell reports that the result was devastating—“inelligible.” After not being permitted to play basketball in tenth grade and after receiving below acceptable grades, his mother decided that he needed a fresh start and transferred him to Hope High School. Cornell reports that, “ever since then, I done changed my attitude around.” Upon reflection, Cornell admits that there were other problems during that time as well, sharing, “I know I would have been in fights every day. Cause I was almost in fights every day. It was bad.” When asked if he is happy with the decision to change schools, Cornell’s responded by saying, “I’m lovin’ it. I’m lovin’ it. Lovin’ it. Lovin it.”

When I inquired about the kinds of things that Cornell has experienced at school that have helped him be successful, his response was interesting. Rather than focus on specific things that aided in his successfulness, he responded by pointing out that there hasn't been anything negative as part of his high school experience, saying, "I really haven't had any problems at all . . . some people tryin' to say that they was racist and this and that, but, that really hasn't been a big problem for me. That's not an issue . . . I haven't experienced nothing that, that is, that's negative in high school . . . everything is good." For my final question, I asked if there were anything else Cornell would like to share that would help me better understand his ability to overcome problems or hard times that we had not previously discussed. Without hesitation, Cornell offered the following, which poignantly summarized the whole of our discussion:

Just because your friends is in [Milltown] doin' things, you don't have to do it. You don't have to. If you see everybody smokin', you don't have to go over there and smoke with them. If this is the chillin' spot, and they sellin' drugs over there, you don't have to go over there and be in there, cause . . . if people see you, they're gonna automatically assume, aw, he's doin' this, he's doin' that . . . so, I don't know. I just depend on my mom, my family, and, uh, that's it. They keepin' me out of it. And [friend's name] is keepin' me out of trouble. Coach, the basketball team, Hope High School, the school is keepin' me out of trouble and, I mean, that's it.

One of the things I noticed throughout my interview with Cornell was his enthusiasm for life. Despite living on welfare and not knowing from month to month if his mother will be able to manage the bills, and despite the destructive activities and

negative choices he sees others participating in on a daily basis, Cornell struck me as a happy, well-adjusted, spirited, and engaging young man. He enthusiastically mentioned attending college several times during our interview and at the same time, had a deep sense of adult responsibility towards both his younger brother and towards his mother. He commented at the start of our interview, “. . . now I’m just in school, tryin’ to help my mom out. I wanna get the good job, get my mom out of Milltown and my whole family out of there. It’s not a cool spot down there sometimes.” After our interview, I wondered if there were something inherent in Cornell’s personality that allowed him to live in negative circumstances yet have a hopeful sense of his future, or if it was the protective factors that were in place that facilitated his success and hopefulness. My conclusion is that it is likely a combination of both things.

Bronfenbrenner (2005) defined human development in terms of the influences of overt, objective, environmental changes. To describe the power of the external environment on development, Bronfenbrenner’s model refers to the interactions that must occur consistently between a person and other people, objects, or symbols in one’s immediate environment. For Cornell, his reflections on the personal interactions he had with others were recalled in a very positive fashion. He spoke of interactions with his mother, his siblings, his friends, his teachers, and his coaches in an affirmative and upbeat way. Bronfenbrenner’s theory views an individual’s environment as consisting not only of close relationships, but also of systems that lie seemingly beyond an individual’s sphere of influence. One system that helped provided support and optimism for Cornell was Hope High School, and he shared on several occasions throughout our interview that he felt happy and supported while at school. When asked if he was



satisfied with his decision to transfer to Hope High School from another school district, Cornell enthusiastically replied, “I’m lovin’ it. I’m lovin’ it. Lovin’ it. Lovin it.”

Applying Ryan and Deci’s (2000, 2006) self-determination theory, Cornell enjoys a strong level of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The following chart (Table 3) indicates how Cornell’s personal attributes, experiences, and characteristics fit within this theoretical framework.

Table 3

*Inter-case Summary of Cornell’s Attributes*

<i>THREE FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS</i>	<i>CORNELL’S ATTRIBUTES</i>
Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High level of self-esteem</li> <li>• Makes independent decisions for himself</li> <li>• Spends time alone as coping mechanism</li> </ul>
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Athletic ability</li> <li>• Views himself as role model</li> <li>• Views himself as team leader</li> <li>• Sense of hopefulness for his future</li> <li>• Aspirations to attend college</li> </ul>
Relatedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong attachment to parents and younger brother</li> <li>• Strong attachment to basketball coach</li> <li>• Belongs to several friend groups</li> </ul>

*Individual Interview 2: Derrick, "The Thinker"*

Derrick was an impressive co-researcher. Throughout our interview, I was struck by the level of maturity and sense of calmness for a sixteen-year old who has experienced many difficulties in his young life. The themes that emerged during my interview with Derrick as protective factors include a close relationship with at least one adult, a relationship with God and church, a strong future orientation, peer factors, and a strong sense of self-reliance.

Derrick reported on time for his scheduled interview, which took place a half hour after school had been dismissed for the day. The interview was held in the school counselor's office, and when Derrick entered, I noted the following. Derrick is a tall, thin, attractive young man with light brown skin and large, dark brown eyes. He wears a very short, neat hair style, and was dressed in a popular adolescent style of clothing. Derrick was wearing very oversized black jeans that hung low on his hips, black, patent leather, high-top tennis shoes, a white oversized t-shirt, and an enormous hooded zip-front sweatshirt with a popular brand's logo across the front. After Derrick settled into his chair, my first impressions of him were that he seemed a bit tentative and shy. He has a very soft, calm voice, and he answered my questions in a very careful way, pausing thoughtfully to search for the answers he wished to share.

After explaining to Derrick how the interview would be conducted and answering any of his preliminary questions, my first interview question asked that he tell me about himself. He replied, "Came up in Milltown. Came up without parents. Living with my grandparents. It wasn't what I wanted, but, ya know, it's what I had to do because I had nobody else to take care of me." It was immediately apparent how figural it was for

Derrick that he was raised without parents. He went on to share that, when he was four years old, his parents abandoned both him and his brother to move to another state. The two young boys were physically left alone in the house until neighbors contacted authorities and his maternal grandparents came for them and provided a home for them so the boys would not have to enter foster care. Derrick recalls, “. . . They left me when I was four. Like when I was four, they just left me in the house and my grandparents came down there, and I was there and my brother was upstairs ‘cause they (parents) were fighting when they left.” For two years after his parents left, Derrick had no contact with either his mother or his father. When he was about six-and-a-half-years old, he recalls, “I finally got ahold of my mom, like, she just called one day out of the blue and was just like, ‘Hey’ and I was like, ‘Who’s this?’ and she was like, ‘Your ma.’”

Since that phone conversation, Derrick stayed in touch with his mother and when he was twelve, his mother returned to Milltown. Derrick, however, struggled to accept some of the things his mother was doing. When I inquired about this, Derrick replied, “Drinking. Smoking . . . . And then she was selling drugs for a while, and then, then I heard that she was prostituting, but I really don’t know . . . I have evidence that she was, uh, either sellin’ drugs or doing drugs ‘cause I went in her purse once and found that.” When Derrick was sharing this information about his mother, he appeared reflective and sad; his eyes dropped and his voice became much lower, to the point that I had difficulty hearing him as he remembered his experiences as a young boy. It seemed that these memories were painful and difficult for Derrick to relive. He shared other difficulties as well. “We didn’t have a lot of food. And then they finally put us on welfare, whatever. So

then we started getting the coupons and all that. Food stamps. . . . I didn't have any clothes. I really didn't have any friends.”

When I asked Derrick what he liked to do for fun, his response surprised me, and his demeanor instantly changed back to being more happy and upbeat. He explained that he liked to “relax,” and when I asked what that looked like for him, he responded,

See, I like to have, I call it alone time. Like, I just sit in my room and play some music and sit there and regroup and just think about what's really goin' on in life, and I'm glad as much as I'm living and stuff, ya know what I'm sayin? And if I don't do that, I'm probably out partying. I don't drink or smoke so, I just go there and just chill with all my friends and cousins and all that stuff.

This theme of “thinking” emerged throughout Derrick's interview, and several times, he spoke about his propensity to ruminate on his experiences and make decisions and choices based on reflective thought and on direction he received as a small boy from his paternal grandmother. He recalls, “Like my Gram . . . before she died, she told me just, take time to think. She always said, ‘think.’ . . . my grandma told me never say, ‘I don't care,’ so, I don't know. I just started carin' about things and think before you do things . . . Think before you act. That's what I can say.”

When asked what kinds of things Derrick has done to help himself deal with any problems or hard times, he stated “Talked it out. Like I said, it's a whole lot of pressure. Just let it go.” He shared that an uncle who lives in Milltown regularly checks in with him to “make sure that everything's all right” and that he and his uncle have a close relationship. In reflecting on what it was specifically about the relationship with his uncle

that has been helpful to Derrick, he shared, “See, I was always stuck in the house so, ya know, I couldn’t see what was goin’ on and, like, my Uncle [name] always talked to my grandma about me, ‘cause they said there was something special about me or whatever, ya know what I’m sayin?” Derrick was not clear on what his uncle and grandmother meant by calling him “something special,” but felt that it was a very positive comment, and shared that they are words he never forgot. Derrick also described how church and his belief in God have helped him get through difficult times. The following dialogue depicts the meaning Derrick ascribes to church and to his belief in God.

Derrick: I don’t know, just, if I would have came up without believing about God, or like, knowin’ what’s good and what’s not, I’d probably be locked up right now. Really, a lot of it would have killed me.

CT: So God plays a role in your life?

Derrick: He plays a big role in my life.

CT: Can you expand on that? Say more about that?

Derrick: I believe that . . . there’s always a good thing you do and a bad thing you don’t do. But in between there, there’s things you *have* to do, and I usually not try to go to what I *have* to do, I just like, ya know, keep it, everything as good as it can be. Like, I’m sayin, if there’s something bad, I know what’s bad and I know what’s not bad.

CT: It sounds like you have some sort of moral compass that you try to live by?

Derrick: Yeah. Like places, like things I do do, and things I don't do. And usually I don't do things 'cause I know where it's gonna put me and if I'm all locked up, then, ya know, I'm stuck. And if I'm not, then I could see what's goin' on and try to help to my ability.

Derrick shared that he was “real Christian” from the age of six and regularly attends church services. When I asked how being at church service is helpful to Derrick, he replied, “I just feel relief. I don't know what it is. It's when I go, I feel like I'm doin' somethin' right cause, they're not making me go. I'm goin' by myself.” Several of Derrick's responses to my questions indicated a pride in his own self-reliance.

When asked about his high school experience, he responded, “It's been good. I got to meet new people and see how other people are dealin' with their problems. And I didn't really go through any peer pressure or bullying or none of that.” When I inquired further about not falling prey to peer pressure, Derrick shared, “The way I look at it . . . peer pressure is making someone do somethin.' And me, you can't make me do anything unless I want to do it. I don't take it as, like, peer pressure.” Several questions later, Derrick contradicted himself by indicating that peers *do* have an influence on him. In response to my question, What kind of things do you experience at school that help you to be successful?, Derrick responded, “Uh, seein' what my friends is doing. Like, seein' them try to accomplish things makes me work harder so that I can be in that position, and, ya know, not be a bum on the street. I'm going to do something with my life. One day . . . [long pause].” For Derrick, it seemed acceptable to be influenced by peers in a positive way, but he clearly took pride in the fact that peers have not had a negative

impact on his choices or decisions. Later in the interview, this idea of accomplishment resurfaced when Derrick shared, “I don’t want to fail. Watch all my friends go, and be the only Black one in the school, cause, really, all the Black people are in my grade. So I want to graduate with my friends, yeah.”

Derrick identified leaving Milltown as a goal he has established for himself and for his future, stating, “I actually want to be someone that went somewhere from Milltown, ya know?” When I asked what that would mean for him, Derrick shared, “I would actually . . . make me a different person, a better person, really.” He shared that he would eventually like to go to college but would like to take a year or so off first. Derrick shared that for now, he would like to get through high school, graduate, and get a job. When I inquired if Derrick believed that growing up in Milltown had something to do with the troubles that he has experienced, he responded, “Yeah, a whole lot. Like drugs, violence, ya know, breaking laws . . . fighting, stabbings . . . gang fights . . . Stealing. Vandalism, breakin’ peoples’ windows, spray paintin’ all the houses and stabbing peoples’ tires. All that crazy stuff.” Clearly, Derrick has dreams of a better future for himself, and connects part of future dreams with his self-reflections and abilities to think. “I take time to *think*. Like, I think about things that teenagers usually don’t think about.” When, I asked if he could give me an example of what he meant, the following dialogue unfolded.

Derrick: I think about, like, when I get older, like, how am I gonna take care of myself. Like, teenagers, ya know, they usually just think about what they’re doin’ this weekend, or whatever.

CT: You’re right about that.

Derrick: I'm usually thinkin' about, like, how am I gonna take care of myself and my kids at the way I'm actin' now, ya know? That's what, that what really pushed me to come to school. Like, 'cause I don't want to be a bum and just do things that I'm doin' now. I want to grow, at a younger age. Like at the age of twenty, I just wanna be, ya know, on my porch, with my kids or whatever, just [long pause], thinkin', I guess.

CT: And enjoying life?

Derrick: Yeah, and enjoyin' life! Sittin' there. Like, I ain't gotta hear about who got killed, who got stabbed, who got busted. And I think that if I keep thinkin' the way I'm thinkin' now, I'll be in that position, ya know?

In addition to Derrick identifying himself as a “thinker,” he also views himself as a positive role-model for a younger cousin and as a positive influence and protector of his mother, who he has recently reconnected with and currently lives with. When I asked Derrick if problems or hard times that he has experienced have in anyway been beneficial to him, he responded that he believes they have. As an example, he spoke of his younger cousin who also lives in Milltown and who is being raised by a father and step-mother, “but his mom is doin' the same thing my mom used to do which really isn't good for him cause he's still young and he's, what, thirteen, and he thinks he always got to impress somebody.” Derrick then spoke of the relationship he has with this cousin and the good feelings he gets from believing he is helpful. Derrick shared, “. . . my Uncle [name] always calls me up and, like, ‘can you talk to [cousin's name] for me?’ And since I've



been talking to him, he's doin', actually, he's on honor roll at school . . . And he hasn't been on punishment in a while. He hasn't done anything dumb. Like, I don't know if he looks up to me or not. That's what they say . . ." I then inquired if the possibility of a younger cousin "looking up" to Derrick has anything to do with how he's choosing to live his life, he replied:

Right! It makes me feel like, I'm not just helpin' me, but I'm helpin' other people. And I enjoy helpin' other people, really. . . . It makes me a better person. Ya know? Like, it stops me from doin' things that I don't, that I *do* want to do, but it's not the correct thing to do. So, like with him (younger cousin) lookin' up to me, puts me in a position as, I gotta act better so he would know how to act, ya know?

Derrick's feelings of responsibility to help do not stop with his younger cousin. He shared that, since he's been living with his mother, he feels in a position to influence her in a positive way, believing, ". . .if I'm with her, I can make things happen between, not just me, but me and her. Like, I already stopped her from goin' out so she don't drink. I mean, she might drink at home, but she don't go out to drink. I'd rather be able to see her, like what she's doin' than me not be able to see her." From this comment, I later wondered if Derrick felt that he is now in a position to control whether or not his mother will leave him again. From his responses about his current relationship with his mother, Derrick seems to assume more of an adult role than a child's role, gleaned from the retelling of a conversation Derrick had with his mother wherein he stated, "It was like, you gotta show me *you're* the parent, 'cause I've been takin' care of myself so it's time for you to take care of yourself. Then she finally took that to the head and started

thinking.” Derrick’s sense of responsibility towards his younger cousin and mother seems to be having a protective and positive impact—not just on others, but on Derrick as well, as he seems to have internalized the influence he has on these two people in his life, and factors in his own positive behavior and good decisions as being helpful to them. As stated earlier, Derrick’s responses to my interview questions were purposeful and thoughtful. Derrick identifies himself as a “thinker,” and I experienced this as we spoke. At moments during our interview, I was surprised that I was speaking with a sixteen-year old, as many of his responses were deep and insightful beyond his chronological age.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), Derrick’s experiences as a very young child would have helped shape his eventual development into a young man. Ecological transitions, according to Bronfenbrenner, are both the instigators and consequences of development, and are considered to be part of the mesosystem that Derrick experienced. His transition from living with his parents to living with his grandparents is a clear example of a change in setting and in role that, from an ecological perspective, has an impact on an individual’s development. As Bronfenbrenner stated, “each . . . transition has developmental consequences that involve the person in new activities and types of social structure” (2005, p. 46). Derrick’s reaction to this life transition could account for his mature and thoughtful insights.

Framed within Ryan and Deci’s (2000, 2006) self-determination theory, Derrick enjoys a strong sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The following chart (Table 4) indicates how Derrick’s personal attributes, experiences, and characteristics fit within this theoretical framework. These attributes are contributing to Derrick’s positive life experiences, despite the negative factors of his past and the negative circumstances

that surround him in his day to day experiences in Milltown. His high levels of competence, autonomy, and relatedness seem to shield Derrick from falling victim to the streets and allow him to have a strong sense of purpose, future orientation, and positive outlook on life.

Table 4

*Inter-case Summary of Derrick’s Attributes*

<i>THREE FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS</i>	<i>DERRICK’S ATTRIBUTES</i>
Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High level of self-esteem</li> <li>• Makes independent decisions for himself</li> <li>• Enjoys spending time alone to help deal with problems</li> </ul>
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Views himself as role model</li> <li>• Sense of hopefulness for his future</li> <li>• Aspirations to attend college</li> </ul>
Relatedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong attachment to uncle</li> <li>• Strong attachment to mother</li> <li>• Strong attachment to younger cousin</li> </ul>

*Individual Interview No. 3: James, “Family—That’s Blood”*

My interview with James provided insights from a perspective that was unique when compared to the perspectives of the other four co-researchers. James was the only co-researcher who lives with his biological mother and father. His nuclear family is intact; he grew up with an older sister who has since moved out on her own, and he currently lives with a younger brother and his parents. The predominant theme that emerged throughout James’ interview as a protective factor was family—immediate and

extended. Other themes that emerged as protective factors included future orientation, and peer factors.

James reported on time for his interview, late in the afternoon after basketball practice. He was cleanly and neatly dressed in a pair of oversized blue jeans that hung low on his hips and a blue and white checked button down shirt that he wore untucked, with a white t-shirt underneath. James is a tall, very thin, young man who had his hair in neat, thin rows, braided tight against his head. He has dark brown skin and dark brown eyes, and an engaging smile. James' remained quiet and reserved throughout our interview, and I got the impression that he is a very private, laid-back, and gentle young man who does not get easily flustered or overly emotional. He maintained good eye-contact when I was speaking and asking questions; yet throughout the entire interview, when James spoke, he looked down towards the floor or otherwise away from me. He regained eye contact as he finished a thought and looked at me only when he was close to completing his sentences. This lack of eye contact may be attributed to cultural factors, to his reserved personality, or simply to a feeling of discomfort when answering questions of a personal nature.

James shared that many of the difficulties and hard times he has faced to this point in his life involve the loss or near loss of family members. He reflected that after his older sister was in a serious car wreck last summer, it "Let me realize that life's too short to mess around." He shared that the deaths of an uncle and cousin have had a very significant impact on him.

I had an uncle. He used to be real close to me. He used to guide me, like guide me when I was in the wrong . . . Put me back in line. He passed

away about five years ago. Heart problem. That's about it. I had to overcome that. And lost a cousin a couple of years ago, like, I used to play basketball with him a lot. And that hurt 'cause he's the one who taught me how to play. Passed away a couple of years ago. He's the one that, like, really introduced me to playing basketball. . . he was in a car wreck . . . and that touched me 'cause, like I say, he introduced me to playin' basketball and taught me everything I know, basically.

When I asked James what types of things he has done to help himself deal with these hard times, he responded by saying, "Try and get out. Try to go to school. Try to do something with my life. So I stay out the streets as much as I can. I know if I'll be on the streets, I'll probably end up sellin' drugs. Probably end up smokin' weed and everything." He mentioned that a close friend and he often play basketball to keep off the streets. "We're real close, like we brothers. And he'll keep me in line or something. . . . I try to hang out with people that I know that's not out there doin' things that they shouldn't do. Like, selling drugs, like smokin' crack or whatever."

In addition to the loss of several family members, other problems or hard times that James recalls having to overcome involve name calling and racial slurs. James explained:

Yeah. I got called a nigger down in [name of town] . . . and instead of just walking away, and not even thinkin', especially since I was in [town], and I'm Black, and I mean, I reacted wrong, punched a dude, got in a fight, had to pay court costs, had to pay fines, and I had to pay for the dude's dentist and all that. And I had to pay for that. I had to go out and do

twenty hours of community service, and I realized that it wasn't even worth it. That's when I realized, but I mean, if I hear it now, I'll still snap, but not like I did before. I won't try to fight everybody about it. . . . Have some words to say and just walk away.

James shared that, since this incident, he has changed his reaction to racial slurs, stating:

. . . name calling. That's everywhere. I got put on probation for name calling. I got into a fight and after that, I realized it's not worth it. I mean, I been called nigger and negro and everything else. . . I ain't worried about it no more. It don't upset me no more . . . name callin's gonna be everywhere. Not just here. You hear it down in Milltown, too. And it ain't nothin' . . .

When I asked James what other things have helped him overcome difficulties or hard times, he responded with a lengthy discourse about the positive influence his grandmother, his uncles, and especially his father have had on his life. James shared that his paternal grandmother lives two blocks away from his family and he speaks with her on the phone and visits her every day. He clearly has a very strong bond with his grandmother, and respects the advice and guidance she provides. James shared, “. . . 'cause my grandmother is like my other parent. I can go to her about anything. . . . she used to tell me every time when I go to clubs, ‘don't drink, don't take a drink with you, don't do nothin' that you know you ain't got no business doin'’. ‘Cause you know it can kill you.’ So when she told me . . . it can kill you, that's when I like, basically, realized that ain't me.” James shared that part of the reason he respects the input he gets from his

grandmother is because “She used to drink. Back in the day. I mean, she gave her life to God or whatever. She in the church and everything now.” James mentioned his relationship with several uncles throughout our interview and viewed his closeness with them as being very beneficial. When speaking about the uncle who was a twin to the uncle who passed away, he stated, “. . . my Uncle [name] kept me in line, ‘cause me and him, we’re like, real close, that’s like my closest uncle. I could talk to him about anything after my Uncle [name] passed away.” Another uncle who lives in another state offers encouragement and support for James when they see each other, which is at least every two years. James views this uncle’s input as helpful because “he’s been through a lot.” James shared that this particular uncle used to use crack but has since gone through rehabilitation.

When I go down there, he’s always telling me, ‘Don’t take my path. Don’t do what I do. Learn from my mistakes.’ So I feel like that’s really helpin’ me out, knowin’ what he’s been through and knowin’ that he’s tellin’ me not to do it ‘cause he’s way older than I am, about forty years older than me. And he’s tellin’ me that he did it before and for me not to even step in that line and take the other road, and that’s what I’m doing.

Aside from guidance and advice received from grandparents and uncles, James shared that the person who has the greatest influence on his ability to make good choices and stay on track is his father. James shared that his father has a reputation in Milltown that, for the most part, prevents James from being in the position to make bad choices, stating, “It (crack) ain’t never came around me. Like, everybody already know, like, everybody down in Milltown already know who my parents is so they look at me and

they already know not to ask me about it. . . . They already know that my dad don't play that." He further added, "Like, if somebody came up to me and asked me to take a blast of some crack or somethin' and my dad found out, my dad would probably flip and wind up in jail." James shared that people have, in the past, asked if James is his father's son, and when they realize who James' father is, they move on.

Throughout our interview, there were many references to James' father and the important place that he has in James' life. Offered below are several examples James offered about his father's support, compiled together to demonstrate the strong bond that exists between father and son.

James: Like I hear, 'Don't be a follower. Be a leader' every day at home from my dad. Don't be a follower. Be a leader. Go out here, get away from everything. There's more than just Milltown. Just get away.' I hear that every day at home.

James: Me and him sat down when I was about fourteen. . . . We talked for, like a good two hours. . . . At that point, he told me that he was my best friend and I was his best friend. I could go to him about anything. No matter what. If I got a girl pregnant, go to him first. Don't hold nothing. If I got caught doin' something I know I ain't had no business doin', go to him. Still gonna get punished, but go to him. . . . I can talk to him about anything, that's why I feel like that's my best friend right now.



James: My dad is my best friend right now. Feel like I don't got to lie to him no more. I don't have to do nothing. I just sit there and talk to him. And, if I done, if I did something wrong and I know that, I take the punishment for it. But he'll still sit down and talk to me about it. . . . Yeah, we talk now.

James: I mean, I, like, sometimes I still gotta lie, try to lie myself out of stuff. Couple of times, but he would always sit down with me, every time I lie. . . . He sat me down and was like, 'All right, we gonna start off new. Like I said, I'm your best friend, you're my best friend. You don't have to lie about nothin.'

James: I know my dad loves me to death. Like, my dad tells us every day, 'There's a grown man out there talking to you about somethin' that he has no business talkin' to you about, come get me, and I'll take care of it.' That lets me know right there that my dad loves me to death. Cause there's some kids' parents out here that's all cracked out and not even worried about their kids.

Several times, James shared his feelings about the importance of having both parents in the house. He also expressed his belief that mothers have a certain role with daughters, and fathers have a certain role with sons since, "they certain things that a son won't go and talk to his mother about. That's why I guess the dad there. That's why I feel it's real

important that both your parents in the house.” James also sees the value of two parents as a result of his father not having a father in his life. “He had one parent in the house, uh, I never met my grandfather. I never met my dad’s dad. He’s been in jail ever since I been born,” and James went on to describe the struggles he knows his paternal grandmother experienced as a result of being a single mother raising several children alone. James described other difficulties he has watched his father struggle to overcome, and took a pertinent message away from his father’s experiences. “. . . my dad and my Uncle [name] always fought . . . they would not talk to each other for a while. And it took them to talk when my sister got in that care wreck last year. That’s when they started talking again. So, I mean, everything is cool now. I mean, you gotta’ squash the beef—that’s blood. And that’s what they did.”

James shared that he and his father settled into the relationship they currently enjoy over time, as James began to get older. When he was younger, James shared that his father expressed his love in a different way.

I used to get whooped. . . . That’s how I was raised. If I stepped out of line, I got whooped. Just about any, any Black kid done got up more than ten beatins’ from their parents . . . you get beat by your parents out of love to let you know, hey, don’t do that. . . . Last time I got whooped I was like ten. I’m seventeen now, so, seven years ago. I won’t never have to get beat again. I ain’t got to be beat with a spoon, a fly swatter, belt, my dad’s hand—that’s the worst. And switch by my grandmother. And all those things put me in line. They used to tell me they got beat with extension

cords. I feel like I'd rather take a slipper upside my head than get hit with an extension cord, but all that stopped a while back. Just talking now.

James' relationship with his father seems to have had a profound impact on him and the choices and decisions he continues to make for himself. His love and respect for his father seemed genuine and heartfelt, and it was very touching to hear him describe the relationship with such admiration and love. I next asked James about his relationship with his younger brother who is fourteen years old. James' face lit up and he got an enormous smile on his face at the mere mention of his brother. He shared:

Me and my brother is real tight. We fight. Brother's fight. We fight a lot but, after we get done fightin', get done scrappin', we love each other to death. I do any—I take a bullet for my brother. I'll do anything for that dude. Like, I mean, I love him to *death*. Me and my brother's real close.

James' close connection to family members supports my assertion that the biggest protective factor in James' life is the support and connection provided by his family. Though he mentioned friends, his basketball coach, and teachers as meaningful, James responded to most of my questions by mentioning the closeness he has to his family members. I asked James if there was anything else he could tell me that would better help me understand his ability to overcome problems or hard times. He responded by saying, "Um, you gotta trust in yourself. Take the right road. Like, our Coach says every day in practice, 'There is two roads. One was less traveled. Take the less traveled road. Go by yourself. Don't follow everybody. Be a leader. Don't be a follower. That's about it.'" It sounded very much like James has been able to internalize the messages he regularly

receives from his grandmother, his father, his uncles, and his basketball coach, and it sounds like he tries to apply these lessons to his life.

James will graduate from high school in less than two months. When I asked him about his future plans, he shared that, “I ain’t gonna let nobody else try to stop me from doin’ what I want to do . . . Plan on going to [college name]. And, like, I got one motto, and I got that from [friend’s name]’s grandmother, and she said, ‘Ready. Set. Learn.’ And that’s what I’m tryin’ to do. Tryin’ to go to college. Get ready, get set, learn. . . . That’s about it.” Near the very end of our interview, I asked James if there was anything else he would like me to know about himself. He responded by describing Milltown’s detrimental characteristics. His final thoughts addressed the negative aspects of his neighborhood and how he has learned to cope.

James: Crack heads, drug dealers, prostitutes, all that. Everything down in little Milltown that’s one mile big. We got the same thing that the Bronx got down there, except the Bronx is worse. Crack heads, like I said. Prostitutes. Everything.

CT: And that’s all obvious on the streets? You see that?

James: Yeah. Poor people. Yeah. There’s people down there that ain’t got no homes. You walk by and they sleepin’ on the benches across the street from the bank. So, I mean, ya got everything down in Milltown. Just gotta learn how to handle it. How to get away from it. That’s how I feel.

Bronfenbrenner (1979; 2005) described human development as the life-span phenomenon of continuity and change that occurs with a person’s reciprocal interactions

with a set of environmental contexts. He discusses how that development can be influenced at each juncture along the way. For James, interactions among him and his family system has been most influential. He continually made reference to the positive interactions he had with his immediate and extended family members and to the support he receives from them. Likewise, James included his neighborhood, Milltown, in his explanation of the life experiences that influences his ability to make healthy choices for himself. Though James generally views his neighborhood as a negative environment, his interactions with it and the people in it have provided additional opportunities for positive development. The following table (Table 4 frames James' attributes, supports, and characteristics within Ryan and Deci's (2000, 2006) self-determination theory, and demonstrates that he, like Cornell and Derrick, have a strong sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, identified as follows:

Table 5

*Inter-case Summary of James' Attributes*

<i>THREE FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS</i>	<i>JAMES' ATTRIBUTES</i>
Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High level of self-esteem</li> <li>• Makes independent decisions for himself</li> </ul>
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Athletic ability</li> <li>• Sense of hopefulness for his future</li> <li>• Aspirations to attend college</li> </ul>
Relatedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong attachment to family in general</li> <li>• Strong attachment to father</li> <li>• Strong attachment to grandmother</li> <li>• Strong attachment to uncles</li> <li>• Strong attachment to younger brother</li> </ul>

*Individual Interview No. 4: Antwone, "I been through all of it!"*

Of the five co-researchers who participated in this study, Antwone has probably been exposed to and has had to overcome the most adversity, hard times, and problems in his young life. Antwone was also the most talkative of the co-researchers and had much to say in response to my questions, sometimes responding in a direction that made it hard to completely distinguish his answers. By all accounts, Antwone seemed to be a well-adjusted, likeable, and happy young man, and I felt honored that he agreed to share his story with me.

Antwone reported on time to his scheduled interview and immediately settled into his seat. He is a very dark-skinned, nineteen year old young man with dark brown eyes and hair that was braided in thick rows, tight to his head. On the day of our interview, Antwone was wearing oversized jeans, unlaced tan Timberland boots, a white t-shirt, and a red and white oversized zip-front sweatshirt with a popular brand logo across the front. He also wore a large, gold chain that had his football team number hanging as a pendant. Happiness and positive energy exuded from Antwone throughout our interview. When I began by asking Antwone to tell me about himself, he replied, "I love to play sports. I try to go to school every day. Try to do the right thing, basically. [Pause, huge smile] Just, Antwone!" Core themes that were brought to light from Antwone's interview and that serve as protective factors include a significant relationship with at least one adult, future orientation, peer factors, self-reliance, and self-esteem.

Some of the more significant difficulties or hard times that Antwone has faced include watching his parents deal drugs out of their home, being removed from his home by child services and placed in foster care when he was in the fourth grade, moving from

placement to placement and from school to school until being adopted by a family at sixteen, witnessing stabbings and shootings, and watching addicts sell their children for drugs. Perhaps the issue that has had the most significant influence on Antwone is that his father is currently serving a life sentence for murder.

In response to my first interview question asking Antwone if he has had to overcome problems or hard times in his life, Antwone reported that, when he was in seventh grade, he learned that his father had murdered someone. He received this news from his adoptive mother. Antwone shared:

. . . what happened was my foster mom called me and was like, don't you have an uncle in [town]? And I was like, yeah, 'cause you know that's where I came from. She's like is your uncle then [name]? And I was like no, that's my dad. And she was like, oh, Antwone, you might want to read the paper. And I was like, what are you talkin' about? And she was like, if that's your dad, then he murdered someone. And I was like, Naw! My dad ain't murdered nobody. And I read the paper and then I called my (natural) mom. My mom was cryin' and stuff and tellin' me what happened, all kind of stuff. And then stuff that she had threats because . . . I guess the man he killed, his family was threatenin' her, like, they terrorized her car, they threw eggs and stuff at the windows of the house—all kinds of stuff. So then she moved to Michigan.

At the time, Antwone had already been removed from his parents' home and was living in a foster home. Still, the news hit him hard.

And when he murdered that dude, I thought everything was over and was like, what am I doin' this for? And like, I don't care, so my grades started slippin'. Teacher said, well you gotta turn this in. Well, I don't care. I don't care what you wan' to do. I don't give a shit, whatever. And they'll be sittin' there sayin' well, you need to do this or you'll get written up.

Write me up, I don't care. That's what my attitude was. I just didn't care.

There was a significant person in Antwone's life who helped him cope with the news about his father: his head football coach. Antwone shared that, in response to his grades and attitude taking a negative plunge, a conversation with his coach helped a great deal.

. . . I talked to [Coach] and he's like . . . 'Antwone, your dad, he did— what he did was wrong.' He said, 'I'm not telling you that he's good or bad or nothing. But, he has his life, you have your life.' When he told me that, I thought about it and was like, that's true. He's a grown man. And he'd probably be happy if he seen that I was doin' good even though he did bad.

This line of thought was pervasive throughout our interview. Rather than responding with anger towards his father, Antwone instead thought about his father's happiness and how Antwone might have a hand in contributing to it. From prison, Antwone's father still has a powerful influence on him. When I asked if Antwone has any contact with his father, he shared that he recently received a letter from his father telling Antwone that he had read about him and his football accomplishments in the newspaper. "And he said that he's proud of me for doing that . . ." I then asked Antwone what it was like to receive a letter like that from his father. He replied, "That he still cares and even though he know he



messed up that he still cares about us, whatever, like he's not just blowin' us off, whatever." Antwone's adoptive mother also provided words that Antwone reflected on regarding his father's choices, ". . . 'cause my mom was telling me, like, I should do the right thing because my dad would be proud of me to see when I'm doin' good even though he did mess up and I don't have a dad in my life, so, yeah. So, I plan on just to graduate so I can show my dad still did it without him or whatever." There were other hints at Antwone's struggles with the direction his father's life took and how it has impacted him. Later in our interview, the subject resurfaced when Antwone shared that he tries to be a positive role model for his younger brother. He shared a conversation he had with this brother:

I been tryin' to help you all I can, but I can't teach you how to be a man. I was like, you gotta do that yourself. I was like, I be in your corner all you want me to, but I can't teach you how to be a man. [long pause] My dad didn't teach me how to be a man. I guess I'm gonna have to teach myself. I know he always tried, but never succeeded.

This was the only point during the interview when Antwone seemed saddened by his reflections. When he shared these words, his voice softened, and his eyes were downcast. A magnet toy that he had been enthusiastically playing with was held still in his hand until he finished these thoughts. It did not take long for Antwone to recover and complete this response by adding:

But the one thing about my dad, if he did his drugs, he did his drinking, he made sure we had something to eat though. He made sure that we had clothes on our back, had somthin' to eat and the bills were paid. But he

still did his drugs. Which I can't really get mad about him, my dad. It's his choice. It's his life. . . . But he's always been a man about makin' sure we had somethin' to eat, clothes, and bills paid. . . So that's why I thank him for what he did. But . . . it's my turn now!

With that, Antwone perked right back up, and continued with the interview with a happy and charming demeanor. It seemed that no matter what topic we were discussing, Antwone had an innately positive response to it. When he said something negative, he countered with a positive statement, as in the above example.

Another difficulty Antwone had to overcome was being removed from his home and being placed in foster care. Antwone remembered that, at twelve, he was working for his uncle as a garbage man and came home to discover that two of his siblings had been taken to a relative's home to prevent child services from removing them. Antwone and a brother were removed to foster homes. Antwone was returned to his parents' home but was quickly removed by child services a second time. At this point, Antwone recalled, "Ya know what? I don't want to go back home. If it's gonna be like this, I don't want to go back home. Start off fresh and do something different." He had opportunities to return to live with his grandparents, but opted to remain in foster care. Antwone remembers that this was a terribly difficult and painful decision. "Cause my grandparents did a lot for me . . . And then to sit there (in court) and tell in your grandma's face that you don't want to stay with her . . . that was hard . . . I had the lawyer say it. 'Cause I couldn't even say it." Antwone shared that he and his grandparents always had a strong relationship, and even after his decision to remain in foster care, his grandmother approached Antwone and said, "You don't have to be embarrassed. . . . That's your decision, that's your decision. . . . I

would not think of you any different.” Antwone completed his thought by stating, “That’s why, why I got respect for my grandma, whatever. She was like, she was always there for me.” Antwone remained in foster care, and had two bad experiences with families before settling in with a family who eventually adopted him legally when he was sixteen years old. He recalls living with one foster mother. “I couldn’t stay with her cause she was just, she was just that kind of, she just an ignorant person, a *very* ignorant person. I couldn’t stay in that house ‘cause I was like, I would go crazy stayin’ in that house.”

In response to my question, What kinds of things have you done to help yourself in dealing with the problems or hard times?, Antwone shared:

. . . if something made me mad, whatever, what I would do is I would just go play basketball, something just to get it off my mind. . . so I just go, either work out, lift weights, or go punch a punching bag if somebody made me mad, whatever. And just go in my room and pay attention to myself.

Antwone then went on to state that he did not always respond to anger in a productive way. He shared that, as a result of a bad fight when he was in sixth grade, the courts sent him to anger management classes. It was there that he learned, “how that’s bad to hold stuff in and don’t talk about it ‘cause you can drive yourself crazy. And I was like, naw, I don’t wanna do that.” In addition to anger management classes, Antwone reported that his grandmother’s words strongly influenced him.

My grandma’s like, Antwone, think about it. If you know you’re gonna beat this kid up and you beat him up, and sit down and think about it, do you feel better now you’ve beat this kid up? Naw . . . She’s like, you got

your anger out but the kid's still gonna be there. . . . And she's like, so, you gotta start thinking about doin' stupid things 'cause two wrongs don't make a right. That's where I got that from. She told me that.

In addition to the guidance Antwone received from his grandmother, his football coach has been a strong and constant presence in Antwone's life since he began playing football with him in seventh grade. As a senior in high school, the six-year relationship that Antwone has enjoyed with his coach can be summarized in this response to my question, Have there been other people in your life who have helped you when you've experienced problems or hard times?

Antwone: Uh, Coach [name].

CT: How so?

Antwone: 'Cause I was always getting in trouble and Coach always sittin' there telling me what to do, 'cause I have a future ahead of me. He said, don't be doin' stupid things because he said I have a bright future. . . . He was always there to tell me, cause to me, Coach is like a father to me, 'cause . . . growin' up, I didn't have a father cause I was in foster care. . . . And Coach would sit down and tell us how things were or he would tell us how, if you did something, what would be the outcome. And he was just always there for me. . . . He's the type of person I could never lie to. I could always tell him the straight truth and he'd never think

anything else about me. So, I like Coach. He helped me out a lot since I first started here. He was always there.

Several times throughout our interview, Antwone referred to his future in a positive and hopeful way. He proudly shared that, in June when he graduates, he will be the first in his family to have graduated from high school and earned a diploma. When I asked him what that means to him, he responded, “A lot! Just to sit there and show that I can do it without you . . .” He shared that after high school, he plans to move out of state to live near his grandparents since they “live around there so if I ever need anything, I just call them and have a job and then eventually start my own family.” He shared that he wants “two kids . . . that’s all I see is two. I ain’t tryin’ to have no Brady Bunch!” He also mentioned of his future, “. . . I’m not tryin’ to be a bum. I wanna make somethin’ of myself. Gonna be known as somebody that’s a good person.” I was moved by Antwone’s desire to be known as a “good person” when so many of today’s young people hold as a primary goal a desire to be rich or famous. Throughout Antwone’s interview, he made several statements about himself that supported his desire to be known as a “good person.” For example, “I always help out, ‘cause to me, I’m a nice guy. I always say, if I have it, you have it. ‘Cause I’m not the type to be stingy about anything” and “I’m a nice goin’ guy.”

Antwone had attended several schools before settling in with the foster family who adopted him. When I asked about his high school experience, Antwone explained that the transition from his old school to Hope High School was fairly easy since the neighborhood where he came from was much more dangerous than Milltown. He shared that, prior to transferring to Hope High School, “you always had to worry about, like,

who's about to fight who. You could get stabbed, shot . . . after school and stuff, like walking home." He shared that, "You have to run with somebody because you can't be by yourself." Compared to his old school, he expected Hope High School to be a "cake walk." I asked him if this was, in fact, his experience, and he replied, "It's like a roller coaster. I have my ups and I have my downs, but I never got too low that I couldn't get back up." Antwone shared that some of his "downs" included learning that his father had committed murder, dealing with a rumor that Antwone had been shot, dealing with an occasional fight, and so forth. When I asked Antwone to share what has been good for him in high school, he responded:

What's been good is that I have something to look forward to. 'Cause before, I used to look at school like, I was square with it, but I didn't care about school. But now that I've been here, teachers actually try and help you, and like, you actually see yourself doin' something in the future, like, it makes you want to do your work . . . Yeah, cause it make you feel good about yourself, like you're doin' somethin' right and you're not out there gang-banging or whatever. It's better than bein' outside selling dope all day.

Based on Antwone's positive experiences, school has acted as a protective factor to help him deal with difficulties or hard times. He credits teachers and coaches in helping him make it through to graduation. A further factor that has aided Antwone in dealing with difficulties or hard times is his inherent good nature and optimistic outlook on life.

Antwone shared a recent compliment received by of his close friends. "Antwone, you know, you're a pretty strong dude 'cause like, technically, I don't know one dude who'd

sit there and try to go to school every day and was. . . on his own since fourteen.” One of my final questions to Antwone was whether he believed that the things he’s experienced have helped him to become a strong person. His response sums up his resilience in the face of tremendous adversity.

Yeah, I would say that. Now I seen what happens when I get down. I seen what happens when I get up so now, I just, I’m prepared for everything. Like when something real bad happens, I know how to prepare for that ‘cause I seen the worst. I don’t know what worse can hurt now or what else can happen so good so . . . I’m prepared for everything now ‘cause I been through all of it.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979; 2005) discussion of the interplay of many systems within one’s environment can be utilized to explain Antwone’s healthy development. Within Antwone’s microsystem, many factors positively influenced him including a strong relationship with his football coach, an influence from his incarcerated father, a supportive grandmother, a positive experience in school, an inherent positive and hopeful outlook on life, and encouraging friends. Ryan and Deci’s (2000, 2006) self-determination theory supports that Antwone’s autonomy, competence, and relatedness all have aided in his success as an African American male adolescent who resides in a high-risk neighborhood. Table 6 summarizes how Antwone’s attributes fit into this theoretical framework.

Table 6

*Inter-case Summary of Antwone’s Attributes*

<i>THREE FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS</i>	<i>ANTWONE’S ATTRIBUTES</i>
Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High level of self-esteem</li> <li>• Makes independent decisions for himself</li> <li>• Accepts responsibility for actions</li> </ul>
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Athletic talent and success</li> <li>• Views himself as role model</li> <li>• Sense of hopefulness for his future</li> <li>• First in family to earn diploma</li> </ul>
Relatedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong attachment to football coach</li> <li>• Strong attachment to grandmother</li> <li>• Belongs to several friend groups</li> </ul>

*Individual Interview No. 5: Michael – “Me being dedicated to me.”*

Michael was the youngest of the five co-researchers interviewed for this study. At just fifteen years of age, Michael, a high school sophomore, had a concrete vision of what he would like his future to entail. He referred to his goal of attending college throughout our interview, seemed proud that he is actively positioning himself to realize this goal, and shared that several influential figures in his life support his goal and impact his ability to stay on track through difficult times. Core themes that emerged during Michael’s interview included basketball, future orientation, high educational aspirations, and family and peer factors.

Michael reported for his scheduled interview a half hour after school had been dismissed for the day. He shared that he spent the half hour working on school work and was pleased that he could go home that night with no homework. Michael is a six foot,



two inch tall, slender but athletic young man who entered the school counseling office for his interview with a hint of shyness. He has light brown skin, dark brown eyes, a short, neat hairstyle, and was dressed nicely in a button-down shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes. Michael is a very soft-spoken, attractive, young man, who articulated his thoughts and insights in a mature and pensive way. Michael remained interested and engaged throughout our interview, maintained good eye contact, and thoughtfully provided answers to the interview questions. Throughout our interview, it felt as though I was speaking with someone much older than fifteen.

At the outset of the interview, Michael described himself as a “fun type of guy” who considers himself to be athletic and interested in many types of sports—basketball being his favorite. Overall, he described himself as an “average dude.” When I asked Michael what else he would like me to know about himself, he shared that his father died of lung cancer at the age of forty-two when Michael was only twelve years old. He then quickly began to describe the troubled relationship he and his mother share, stating “Me and her don’t get along really well.” He shared that he has spent many of his summers living with aunts in other cities and currently lives in a housing project in Milltown with an uncle—his father’s brother. In response to my question inquiring about difficulties or hard times Michael has experienced, he offered that, in addition to the death of his father, “. . . probably just moving out of my mom’s house. Like not bein’ havin’ a mom.” The problems between Michael and his mother began shortly after the death of his father, though his parents had been divorced for two years at the time of his father’s death. He shared that his parents’ divorce had been hard on him “‘cause then we always had to go back and forth from babysitting. Never seen my dad like besides after school. I only seen

him like an hour a day.” Michael reports, “. . . And ‘cause my mom, like, she started drinking a lot more, so. I guess that’s why we started arguing ‘cause she was a drinker, and I didn’t like it at all and just started arguing all the time.” He added, “And my dad died, so I guess that just broke her down and she took most of it out on me.” Since moving out of his mother’s house, Michael reports that he speaks with her on the phone at least every other day.

In response to my question, What kinds of things have you done to help yourself in dealing with any of the problems or hard times?, Michael replied, “Um, besides basketball, I try to get my grades right so I can go to college. I know my dad, that’s the main thing he stressed on me was to get my grades decent, so I try to do that . . .” Earning good grades in high school and hopes to attend college were recurring responses to several interview questions posed to Michael. In response to my inquiry about Michael’s high school experience, he enthusiastically responded, “I love high school!” and went on to share that, in addition to the enjoyment of “being around everybody”—friends, basketball teammates, football teammates, “I’m trying to get to college, so I guess learning new things would be all right, too.” Michael shared that school has always come relatively easy for him. When he gets “dumb grades on my report card,” he attributes it to his own “slackin’ off,” but quickly added, “But the work comes easy.” With aspirations of becoming a math teacher, Michael shared that an older cousin who he is very close to, “has just been on me so much this year about going to college, and I really want to. That’s my number one goal is to get into college.” Michael hopes that his excellence in basketball will facilitate his path into college. Where many adolescents his age inflate their athletic abilities, Michael has a realistic and mature appreciation of what it will take.

Though he shared that he is athletically talented, he followed with, “I’m realizing that there are kids out there better than me so I gotta work, and I’m tall, but there’s kids seven foot out there and so I gotta work extra hard to get to college . . .” In addition to his continual focus on his grades, Michael is dedicated to becoming the best basketball player he can become. He recognized the benefits that basketball may have in helping him get to college, but he also shared that for him, basketball serves another purpose. “I *love* playin’ basketball, and that just helps clear my mind and stuff, so I do it everyday.” When I asked Michael if he could try to put into words what basketball does for him, he replied:

Michael: Um, like when I’m on the court, like, I think about nothin’ else besides getting myself better at basketball.

CT: Okay.

Michael: And, like, especially when I’m by myself. I’m just like in a zone or something. I don’t seem to hear nothing. I’m just focused on basketball. When people are around playin’ with me, I guess I’m having fun and focused at the same time, so it’s the only thing I focus on—basketball.

In response to my line of questioning about others who may have helped him deal with difficulties or hard times in his life, Michael indicated that he has strong support from his family that shows itself in a variety of ways.

I’d probably say it would be family. Like, other family members. ‘Cause they do help me remember the good things about my dad and my mom and all that stuff. Like, every time I go down my aunt’s house, it’s all she says, I

look like my dad, and if he was here, he'd be so proud of me and all . . .

That just helps me, like, realize, that he wasn't just here for bein' strict on me and stuff like that, but that he was a good person, and my mom, too.

Michael also shared that family members have always stepped in when he was struggling with difficulties with his family. "But, it's like, family would help me out with that. My uncle, he let me live with him, and my cousin, he tries to be as much of a father figure to me as he can." He further added, ". . . every time I had problems with my dad and my mom, she (an aunt) would come pick me up, take me to [town], and I'd stay there the whole summer with her, or I'd stay a week with her until I focused or didn't get mad at my parents anymore." Michael talked about the special relationship he has with an older cousin who lives near him in Milltown. He shared that he sees this cousin every day and that he supports Michael both on and off the basketball court. "He helps me so much. He'll take me to camp this summer and he takes me to the Y every other day and teaches me drills that I don't know." Michael sees this cousin regularly. "I go down there basically every day. I eat down there. Play Play Station with him all the time, so. I guess he thinks that I'm gonna be a good role model for his son. That's why he likes me down there, so."

This response led to a discussion about what it meant to Michael to have his cousin view him as a positive role model for his young son. Michael's face lit up with a smile. He answered:

It makes me want to, like, act right for him. Especially when I'm around him, so. Set a good example for him, and, I'd do the same thing when I was with my sister, but I always wanted a little brother, so he's like my little

brother right now. And basketball, he's a good basketball player, too, so I help him when he's playing basketball with me, just like my cousin did for me. So hopefully, I can be like that, like my cousin is for me, like that for him.

My final line of questioning was an attempt to understand how Michael lives in such a high-risk neighborhood yet is able to not get drawn into the problems that are going on around him. He discussed risk factors that he is regularly exposed to, shared that he only has two friends who are not in trouble for selling or using drugs, and that it is a constant struggle for him to stay away from drugs. A compilation of Michael's responses are provided below and attempt to shed light on his ability to live in a neighborhood where drug use and sales are pervasive, yet continually make positive choices that keep him from falling victim to the streets.

Michael: It's hard, but, it's like, my dad . . . he was so strict on me . . . my friends are all into it, but I guess I'm just smart enough not to get into that stuff. Plus I got, my goals are so high, so . . . That's not even a chance for me to do that stuff 'cause it's not really worth it. I know so many kids that's got in trouble for it. And so many kids with a lot of talent, too, just do it and ruin their life, so, I don't really want that to happen to me, so I don't do it.

Michael: I guess—it's just my dad. Like, every time drugs or something is around me, I just try to remember what he's

telling me, or looking down on me or something like that.

And I just end up not doin' it.

Michael: That's probably one of the benefits of living in Milltown is seeing how many people have messed up their lives. I know so many kids down there that had so much talent and just got into the drug game and stuff and just threw everything away . . . And I don't want that to be me.

Michael: And I guess I'm real close with, my, just a lot of everybody that's in the drug game and, they're all telling me not to get into it or don't do dumb stuff like that, too. So it's helped me a lot, and I listen. I guess I listen to them.

Michael: I got too bright a future to be getting' into that stuff, so. I always just remember that, like every single time, like, basically every day. I try to stay away from it as much as I can. That's why I'm always at my cousin's house. Especially during the summer when school's not on and kids are just sellin' drugs and smokin' weed and all that stuff, so.

My final question asked if there was anything else Michael would like to share that could better help me understand his ability to overcome problems or hard times that we hadn't already discussed. He replied, "Um [long pause]. I guess, just, me being dedicated to me, like not doing something that I don't want to do . . ." Several of the supportive factors that Michael discussed are similar to those that emerged from other co-

researchers. Table 7 summarizes Michael’s main attributes as they correspond with the three fundamental needs of the self-determination theory provided by Ryan and Deci (2000, 2006). Michael demonstrates a positive level of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—factors that likely facilitate his ability to overcome difficulties or hard times.

Table 7

*Inter-case Summary of Michael’s Attributes*

<i>THREE FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS</i>	<i>MICHAEL’S ATTRIBUTES</i>
Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High level of self-esteem</li> <li>• High level of self-efficacy</li> <li>• High level of self-awareness</li> <li>• Independent</li> <li>• Accepts responsibility for actions</li> </ul>
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Athletic talent and success</li> <li>• Role model to younger cousin</li> <li>• Hopefulness for his future</li> <li>• Aspirations to attend college</li> </ul>
Relatedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong attachment to uncle</li> <li>• Strong attachment to cousin</li> <li>• Strong attachment to aunt</li> <li>• Connectedness to school</li> <li>• Belongs to several friend groups</li> </ul>

*Thematic Similarities of Co-Researchers' Attributes as they Relate to Fundamental Needs of Self-determination Theory*

All co-researchers possess attributes that correspond to attributes identified by Ryan and Deci's (2000, 2006) self-determination theory. Table 7 indicates the most prominent protective factors that emerged across participants. In this table, "P1," "P2," and so forth indicates "Participant 1," "Participant 2," and so on.

Table 8

*Cross-case Comparison of Factors Related to Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness*

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5
<i>Factors Related to Autonomy</i>					
• High level of self-esteem	X	X	X	X	X
• High level of self-efficacy	X	X	X	X	X
• Internal locus of control	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Factors Related to Competence</i>					
• Athletic ability	X		X	X	X
• Viewed as role model	X	X		X	X
• Hopefulness for future	X	X	X	X	X
• Aspirations to attend college	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Factors Related to Relatedness</i>					
• Attachment to parent(s)	X		X		X
• Attachment to coach	X			X	
• Attachment to other adult	X	X	X	X	X
• Attachment to friends	X	X	X	X	X
• Connectedness to school	X	X	X	X	X

Autonomy is characterized by an internal local of control and the perception that behaviors are freely chosen (Deci & Ryan, 1995). Table 7 indicates that all five co-researchers possess a high level of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and internal locus of



control. Competence is characterized by a sense of mastery and the feeling of being successful (Deci & Ryan, 1995). All co-researchers have indicated their feelings of competence, demonstrated through their athletic abilities, their position as role model or leader, their hopefulness for their futures, or their aspirations and beliefs that they will attend college. Relatedness is characterized by satisfaction and involvement with one's social world (Deci & Ryan, 1995). Co-researchers all shared a sense of relatedness through an attachment to members of their family, a caring and involved adult outside of the family, and friends. Finally, all five co-researchers shared a positive sense of connection with their school. When viewed as a whole, the supportive and affirmative aspects of co-researchers' lives have acted as protective factors that likely had a facilitative role in the school success enjoyed by all participants despite the negative conditions that exist in Milltown. Next is a discussion summarizing components of co-researchers' lives that are linked to Bronfenbrenner's (1975, 2005) bioecological model.

#### Links to Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory

In applying the theoretical framework provided by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005), factors at the level of the individual adolescent, their immediate environment, and the wider social context in which they live are considered. Exploring the interactive relationships provides a way of understanding individuals in multiple, layered, and interacting environments. Bronfenbrenner's model recognizes that individuals do not develop in isolation, but in relation to their families and home, school, community, and society. In order to develop emotionally, intellectually, socially, and morally, individuals require active participation in reciprocal interactions with people, and develop as a result of the social influences of individuals' immediate environment regularly and over

extended periods of time. These proximal processes can result in outcomes of developmental competence or developmental dysfunction (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Within this study, the microsystem structure includes the influences among the adolescents under investigation and their families, schools, peers, church groups, and neighborhoods. Bronfenbrenner (1995) highlights the importance of bidirectional interactions with adults in an individual's life, which can have either a positive or negative effect on development depending on the quality of the relationship. Adolescents in this study shared that, for the most part, microsystem influences have been predominantly positive and have therefore served as protective factors for the adolescents. Though four of the five co-researchers acknowledged that their neighborhood is unsafe, drug infested, and crime ridden, positive and supportive interactions with family, peers, school, coaches, and church may have counteracted negative influences of a dangerous neighborhood environment. According to the bioecological theory, the positive relationships and bidirectional interactions between adolescents and the factors within their microsystems may have shielded these adolescents from the negative effects of living in a high-risk neighborhood, allowing for healthy cognitive, emotional, intellectual, and social development. When interpersonal interactions are strong and positive, the psychological growth of an individual is accelerated.

The next layer of Bronfenbrenner's (1975, 2005) model is the mesosystem, which is composed of the relationships between the members of the microsystem. The mesosystem examines the impact intermediate levels of influences have on the

individual, such as the relationships between peers and school or the relationship between parents and teachers. For instance, if an adolescent's parents have a positive relationship with teachers, the adolescent will be better equipped to perform well in the school setting (Huitt, 2002). In this study, several of the co-researchers indicated that parents or guardians recognize the dangers and negative influence that exist in their neighborhood and work to prevent these adolescents from falling victim to the streets. Michael shared that his cousin regularly takes him to the YMCA so that he can practice his basketball skills outside of Milltown; James shared that his father and grandmother warn him almost daily about the dangers involved in the streets of Milltown. James is aware that his father is available to him if he ever finds himself in a predicament within the neighborhood. Derrick shared that his peers' academic motivation encourages his own desire to do well in school so as not to be left behind. These examples of mesosystem interactions demonstrate how positive influences of one factor within the microsystem can counteract the negative influences of another.

The third layer, the exosystem, is comprised of the indirect influences on an individual's life such as parent's work schedule, community based resources, or religious associations. The exosystem involves individuals and agencies that ultimately impact an individual, but where the individual does not function directly. Cornell shared that he and his mother often miss seeing one another because of his mother's work schedule. Cornell's mother counteracts the lack of time spent with Cornell by continuing to have a strong emotional investment in Cornell's life. She demonstrates this by regularly checking in with Cornell to see how Cornell is doing, how his day is going, and so on.

The last two layers are the macrosystem and the chronosystem. An individual's culture, customs, and laws are explored in the macrosystem. Messages sent by the media of what is appropriate or inappropriate behavior and social reactions to juvenile crime are two examples of influences found at the macrosystem level. James shared that part of the way in which his father demonstrates his love was through "whoopings," and commented that "any Black kid done got up more than ten beatins' from their parents." A second example of the impact of the macrosystem on the co-researchers is demonstrated in the co-researchers' choice of clothing. Each was dressed in a style that is predominant in the hip-hop culture and is widely seen in music videos, movies, magazines, and television.

Change or consistency of any element affecting an individual's life over time defines the chronosystem. Examples of the chronosystem include economic recessions and depressions, increases in divorce rates, and so forth. Neighborhood decline and chronic drug use in Milltown are examples of chronosystem level influences in this study. As the neighborhood further deteriorates, opportunities available to the co-researchers who reside there become nonexistent. Several co-researchers shared that they wish to leave Milltown in order to have a better life. All five co-researchers shared that the drug use in Milltown is rampant and that it has a daily impact on them, either through temptations that they constantly fight or through the dangers that drugs brings to their neighborhood environment.

Given these examples of the interplay among Bronfenbrenner's interconnected set of systems, it is clear that the relationships operating at various levels are bidirectional and interrelated in a complex and ever-changing atmosphere. The interactions between the levels of the bioecological model and co-researchers in this study indicate the

potential for success that exists when there is a feeling of constant, mutual support. In this study, this support has resulted in co-researchers experiencing sufficient protective factors in their lives that allow them to be successful despite living in a high-risk neighborhood.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 2005) bio-ecological theory of human development and Ryan and Deci's (2005) self-determination theory are two useful theories to support the development of the five co-researchers who participated in this study. These theories offer different but supportive perspectives of the interplay between the environmental influences of systems and personality traits and characteristics that can be applied to account for the positive and healthy development of the co-researchers who participated in this study.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

Adolescence can be one of the most difficult and turbulent times in a person's life. Physical changes, emotional tribulations, parental expectations, and peer pressures are but a few of the challenges that face many of today's youth during this transitional period. After factoring in detriments such as underprivileged neighborhoods and schools, domestic abuse, mental health concerns, family discord, and lack of parental involvement or support, and it is remarkable that certain youth can competently weather the adolescent experience and go on to lead productive and happy lives. For some African American youth, added complications such as low parental education, barriers within the educational system, overrepresentation in the criminal justice system, community violence, lack of opportunities, and institutional racism add further complications to this arduous time of life (Smith, 2004; Constantine, Erickson, Banks, & Timberlake, 1998; Garbarino, 1995, 1999). The ability for some minority youth to overcome the disproportionate obstacles that are a part of daily life in a high-risk neighborhood piqued my curiosity. My desire to learn more about the protective factors that facilitate and support school success in this population of youth was the primary reason for wanting to conduct this study. While the topic of protective factors has been comprehensively examined for adolescents in general, there have been few studies that examine the existence of protective factors for African American male youth. The general lack of information about this topic in the literature and a specific lack of qualitative research on this subject provided additional rationale for conducting this investigation. The results of

this qualitative investigation emerged from semi-structured personal interviews with five African American male adolescents, ages 15 to 19, who reside in a high-risk neighborhood and who are experiencing school success.

In this chapter, I offer a discussion on my findings utilizing the supportive frameworks of Ryan and Deci's (2000, 2006) self-determination theory (SDT) and Bronfenbrenner's (1995) bioecological systems theory. As discussed in Chapter 2, these two theoretical frameworks take into account the combined individual and environmental aspects of a person's development, and recognize that the positive interplay of several influencing factors can result in favorable outcomes. Lynch and Levers (2007) encapsulate the ways in which the above ecological-transactional and motivational theories serve to inform:

When opportunities to satisfy basic needs are consistently available and accessible within the environment, it is expected that the natural propensities for growth and development will unfold, and well-being will ensue (p. 603).

The discussion in this Chapter highlights the protective factors that have been accessible within the environment to the adolescent participants of this study. Findings will reveal how, through basic need satisfaction within the individual, social, or physical contexts, these adolescents have enjoyed school success, despite the negative aspects of living in an unfavorable and high-risk environment. The discussion is framed within the four primary categories of themes that surfaced from individual interviews: (a) the satisfaction of needs outlined by SDT (autonomy, competence, relatedness); (b) opportunities for meaningful participation; (c) a strong connection with at least one adult; and (d) a strong

connection with friends. Also in this Chapter, I present implications of my findings for the work conducted by school counselors specifically, and for others within the educational arena generally. Finally, I offer recommendations for further research within this important area of concentration.

#### Interpreting Finding 1: Satisfaction of Needs

The first major theme that emerged from the data and that was seen in all five co-researchers involved the satisfaction of the three fundamental needs of SDT—autonomy, competence, and relatedness. According to SDT, when these three needs are met, growth, development, and well-being occur (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Lynch and Levers (2007) presented that SDT “posits a kind of dialectical tension between an active, integrating human person on the one hand, and the social environment on the other” (p. 594). They encapsulated the dialectical process that underlies SDT into the following cycle:

- Life in the physical and social world presents challenges (*theses*).
- The person must respond to the world’s challenges (*antitheses*).
- Responses to *theses*, or life challenges, optimally lead to new levels of complexity and integration (*syntheses*) (p. 595).

Living in a high-risk neighborhood posed significant challenges to the adolescents under investigation. Each co-researcher shared his perspective on what it meant to live in such an unfavorable and unsafe place, and each talked about the people or things that have been beneficial in counteracting the negative effects of living in a harsh environment. The ways in which co-researchers responded to this life challenge offers insight into the protective factors that have allowed them to amalgamate living in a high-risk environment with school success. The three basic psychological needs outlined by SDT



are the first theme uncovered to be a combined protective factor, and has served to promote school success in the adolescents who participated in this study. These needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are discussed next.

### *Autonomy*

“Autonomy refers to the experience of being the initiator of one’s own behavior,” and “involves having voice and having choice in one’s own behavior” (Lynch & Levers, 2007, p. 596). Autonomy encompasses many personal characteristics including an individual’s self-esteem, self-efficacy, sense of control over his or her environment, self-awareness, sense of mastery, independence, adaptive distancing, and self-regulation (Benard, 1991, Ryan & Deci, 2000). All five co-researchers shared ways in which they were the initiators of their own behavior and demonstrated most, if not all, of the above-indicated characteristics. Cornell and Antwone, for example, possessed a level of self-esteem that brimmed over when they spoke. Their inherent confidence showed through in their interaction with me throughout their interviews and in how they described themselves and their circumstances. Both young men had positive, confident, happy, and energetic dispositions and an overall positive outlook on life. They both discussed making the best of discouraging circumstances. When Cornell disclosed that his family is on welfare, lives paycheck to paycheck, and often has the electric or cable turned off, he shared, “...and now I’m just in school, tryin’ to help my mom out. I wanna get the good job, get my mom out of [town] and my whole family out of there.” When Cornell spoke about attending college next year, he shared, “I’m really lookin’ forward to it, and I’m ready to go!” Cornell’s sense of control in an environment over which he realistically has little control shows itself in the form of his desire to work towards a better future for

himself and his family. When I asked Antwone to tell me about his high school experience, his response was an example of his overall optimism and self-efficacy. “It’s like a roller coaster. I have my ups, and I have my downs, but I never got too low that I couldn’t get back up!” Antwone’s dispiriting experiences have not defeated him, and his sense of mastery in dealing with his circumstances is a beneficial protective factor that has helped to promote his school success. Indeed, his culminating experiences have resulted in his buoyant confidence and belief that he can overcome anything. He shared:

“Now I seen what happens when I get down. I seen what happens when I get up so now . . . I’m prepared for everything. Like when something real bad happens, I know how to prepare for it, cause I seen the worst. I don’t know what worse can hurt now or what else can happen so good so . . . I’m prepared for everything now, ‘cause I been through all of it.”

Cornell, James, and Michael demonstrated adaptive distancing in some of their friendships. These co-researchers have found ways to have friendships with individuals who are making detrimental personal choices without themselves becoming involved in negative or harmful behaviors such as using or selling drugs. When I asked Michael if he is ever faced with offerings to use drugs, his reply was honest and immediate. “All the time. I got too bright a future to be gettin’ into that stuff . . . I always just remember that, like every single time, like basically every day.” Michael has paid close attention to other adolescents who have had “so much talent . . . and just threw everything away, ‘cause of drugs . . .,” completing his thought by stating, “And I don’t want that to be me.” Like Michael, James is regularly exposed to drug use and drinking, and recalled the warnings of his grandmother. “. . . She [grandmother] talks to me everyday about it. Tells me not to

even get involved with it . . . she used to tell me every time when I go to clubs, ‘don’t drink . . . don’t do nothing that you know you ain’t got no business doin.’” James has internalized these messages and spoke of being able to have fun and enjoy himself at clubs and at parties with friends, while continuing to make positive and healthy choices.

Ryan and Deci (2000) discuss an analysis of self-regulation, which is concerned with “how people take in social values and extrinsic contingencies and progressively transform them into personal values and self-motivations” (p. 69). Human beings are embedded in social contexts throughout life. The co-researchers in this study have absorbed the social values present in the context of their high-risk neighborhood and through personal values and self-motivations, have positively adapted to a negative environment. Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, and Kaplan (2003) indicate that being autonomous does not mean to be independent of others; rather, it means to “feel a sense of willingness and choice when acting, whether the actions are independently initiated or are in response to a request from significant others” (p. 99). Whether independently initiated or in response to another’s request, having voice and having a choice in their pathways of life has impacted these co-researchers in constructive ways, and high levels of self-esteem, self-awareness, self-regulation, and adaptive distancing have all factored into the autonomy experienced by the co-researchers. Autonomy as a protective factor has played a role in the ability of these adolescents to enjoy success in school, and has supported the movement of these adolescents towards a more positive and healthy future.

### *Competence*

According to Lynch and Levers (2007), competence “reflects the capacity to feel, and indeed, to be effective in one’s interactions with the physical and social

environment” (p. 595). Physical competencies can be demonstrated through mastery of a physical activity or task; social competencies can include being responsive to others, demonstrating empathy and caring, having communication skills, and having a sense of humor (Benard, 1991). For some minority youth, individual-psychological characteristics also can act as protective factors for their healthy development. Perceived self-confidence, for example, has been identified as a key attribute for positive development among minority youth (Cauce, 1986). All co-researchers expressed healthy levels of competence that revealed itself in a variety of ways.

For Cornell, Antwone, James, and Michael, athletic pursuits have provided ample opportunities for success within these adolescents’ physical environments. During this past basketball season, Cornell, James, and Michael were three of the five starters for their high school basketball team and made history by becoming the first team to ever win a section championship for their high school. Similarly, Antwone has experienced celebrated success at football, winning several awards for his defensive plays on the football field since joining the team in his seventh grade year.

Derrick’s competence revealed itself in his beliefs that he has much to offer others in the way of understanding and empathy. A statement made by an uncle and grandmother early in Derrick’s life has lingered with him to this day. He recalled, “. . . my Uncle [name] always talked to my grandma about me, ‘cause they said there was somethin’ special about me . . .” Derrick shared that this belief has often helped him overcome difficulties and, when talking about how his experiences might be useful in his future endeavors, Derrick stated, “I could be a school counselor. And I could understand different kids, and you know, respond to how my life was.” Derrick expressed his belief

that his own difficult experiences thus far in life will allow him to someday help others.

“. . . I think that, I've been through more than any other person. . . . I went through so

much . . . I just think that I can help people.” In addition to his success at athletics,

Michael's competencies were also indicated through his determination to be academically successful in high school with a future goal of attending college.

All five young men believed themselves to be role models to a younger friend or family member. All five viewed this to be a prominent aspect of their adolescence and

believed that they had something positive and useful to offer others. When I asked

Derrick to share what it is like to have others look up to him, he responded, “It makes me

a better person. . . . So, like with him [younger cousin] lookin' up to me, puts me in a

position as, I gotta act better so he would know how to act, ya know?” Michael shared

similar thoughts when discussing his position as role model to his younger cousin,

stating, “It makes me want to like, act right for him. Especially when I'm around him. Set

a good example for him . . . just like my other cousin did for me. . . . Hopefully, I can be

like that, like my other cousin is for me, like that for him.” Similarly, Cornell described

his position as a role model to others on the basketball team. “He [basketball coach] tell

me a lot that the team look up to me. A lot of people look up to me, and I gotta set an

example so I try, I try.” When my co-researchers discussed their positions as role models,

their pride and enthusiasm was apparent. Having an adult who trusts these young men to

act as positive role models to other children has boosted their self-confidence, self-

esteem, and feeling of competence. Throughout their individual interviews, all five of

these young men shared thoughts and insights that supported their feelings of

competence, and my observations and interactions with them support that their beliefs about their levels of competence are accurate.

### *Relatedness*

Lynch and Levers (2007) offer that relatedness “refers to a sense of belongingness with others and with one’s community; it includes the presence of relationships that are characterized by mutual caring” (p. 595). On many occasions throughout our individual interviews, all five young men shared examples of their sense of belongingness with others and as part of their community. Even within a high-risk neighborhood such as Milltown, a sense of community exists, and the co-researchers in this study shared feeling a sense of connection to their neighborhood, despite its negative characteristics. Having a strong sense of family connection was most prominent in James’ interview, and the majority of his responses to questions around who or what has helped him through difficulties or hard times primarily included immediate and extended family members. James was the only adolescent who currently lives with both his mother and his father, married for over 15 years, and with his younger brother. He expressed a very close connection to his father (“he’s my best friend”), to his grandmother (“I talk to her or visit her everyday”), and to his younger brother (“I love that dude to death!”). James also shared that there is a strong bond between he and several uncles who he does not see on a regular basis but who he feels have impacted his life in positive and meaningful ways.

Cornell, Derrick, Antwone, and Michael expressed a sense of belonging as well through their relationships with parents, siblings, friends, cousins, uncles, aunts, coaches, and teammates. Three co-researchers indicated that they are also comfortable spending

time alone—something not always comfortable for adolescents. Despite the fact that Cornell and Michael both shared that when they feel angry, frustrated, or sad, they spend time alone playing basketball to help manage their emotions, neither expressed feelings of isolation or loneliness. Derrick referred to his “alone time” as necessary in helping him to regroup and think about life. The relationship that these adolescents have with themselves is a positive attribute that has served them well during a time of life that is often strongly influenced by the words and behaviors of peers. The adolescents in this study clearly feel strong, caring connections with people in their lives while, at the same time, being comfortable spending time alone. This feeling of relatedness, separately and in conjunction with feelings of competence and autonomy, are offered as protective factors that exist in their lives of these adolescents that have helped them enjoy school success despite living in a high-risk neighborhood.

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), when basic psychological needs are met, they “provide the appropriate developmental lattice upon which an active, assimilative, and integrated nature can ascend” (p. 76). The adolescents who participated in this study have demonstrated a strong sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, that is, their “developmental lattice” has been established in ways that position them to know their environment, understand how and why they maneuver through their environment as they do, and make the kind of choices that facilitates and support an ability to succeed in school, despite living in a high-risk environment. From the ecological systems perspective, these adolescents are influenced by a network of interrelated systems, and each system has had an influence on the overall intellectual, emotional, and social development of the co-researchers. Exploring the interactive relationships provides a way

of understanding individuals in multiple, layered, and interacting environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). The bioecological model also recognizes that individuals do not develop in isolation, but in relation to their families, homes, schools, communities, and society. Examples provided throughout this Chapter provide evidence that the interplay of co-researchers at the microsystem (home, school, neighborhood) and the mesosystem (connections among things in the microsystem) levels have had a direct impact in fostering developmental competencies in these youth. Applying the bioecological model allows for a holistic, integrative view of the co-researchers rather than a fragmented view of the adolescents, their families, their school, and their neighborhood.

The next section discusses the positive impact that meaningful participation has had in the lives of four of the five co-researchers. Derrick was the only participant who does not currently participate in basketball or other sports, though he has played in the past. For Derrick, then, this protective factor was not present.

#### Interpreting Finding 2: Opportunities for Meaningful Participation

Rokach (2001) found that activity involvement, whether in or out of school, is beneficial for children and adolescents and is positively associated with adaptation and personal development. For three of the five co-researchers, basketball was mentioned within the first three sentences of our interviews, and for a fourth co-researcher, sports and football was mentioned early in our interview as well. The benefits these adolescents have gained through meaningful participation in athletics supports the tenants of sports counseling as a positive impetus for healthy and positive development. Sports counseling is emerging as a practice whose aim is to counsel athletes on the psychological impact of sports. Tinsley and Levers (2007) discuss sports counseling as a means to assist



adolescents in their quest for positive development. They distinguish sports psychology from sports counseling, as follows.

Sports psychology, which largely focuses on athletic performance and enhancement, has emerged as a sub-discipline in psychology. Sports counselling, on the other hand, has emerged as a sub-discipline amongst counsellors, and largely focuses on the array of psychosocial concerns of athletes beyond performance enhancement (in press).

Tinsley and Levers (2007) have suggested that many benefits arise from a child or adolescent participant in sports, including but not limited to, cooperation, teamwork, sportsmanship, self-evaluation, and healthy competition. For the adolescents in this study, basketball and football are not simply something to do for fun, nor is participation in sports simply for the benefit of being part of a winning team. Rather, as uncovered in my interviews and as supported by the findings of Tinsley and Levers (2007), sports have been therapeutic in helping these young men deal with negative thoughts and emotions. Antwone shared, “. . . if something made me mad, whatever, what I would do is, I would just go play basketball, something just to get it off my mind. . . . so I just go, either work out, lift weights, or go punch a punching bag if somebody made me mad . . .” Cornell likewise shared that he often deals with difficulties through basketball. “. . . if I’m ever havin’ a bad day, if I pick up a basketball, all that go away. It’s not there no more. I’m not worried about nothin’ else. Basketball is my way out.”

Meaningful participation in sports was also viewed by several co-researchers as their ticket to a brighter future. Cornell and Michael each discussed their commitment to improving their abilities on the basketball court and shared that, in addition to playing for

an organized basketball team at their high school, they practice three to four hours a day in the hopes of becoming better athletes. Michael shared his goal of becoming a math teacher and understands that college is an expensive endeavor. He hopes that his abilities on the basketball court will pay off in the form of scholarship monies to help defray the cost of his education. “. . . I work so hard at basketball. I’m realizing that there are kids out there better than me, so I just gotta work, and I’m so tall, but there’s kids seven foot out there, so I gotta work extra hard to get to college . . .”

The game itself is not the only factor relating to involvement in sports that serves as a protective factor, as Cornell, Antwone, James, and Michael all mentioned the positive influence of other components of the game. Leadership skills, dealing with diversity in teammates, enjoying close relationships with coaches, self-discipline, and competence at the game were all identified as important factors that make basketball such an advantageous element in the lives of these young men.

As a senior in high school, Cornell’s abilities, self-control, leadership, and passion for the game have resulted in him being scouted by a college team, and his vision for his future includes continuing his education and playing basketball at a local four-year college. James plans to attend a four year college next year as well and to be part of the college’s basketball team. For both Cornell and Michael, basketball has helped keep them from falling victim to the streets. Both boys mentioned being able to resist peer pressure or temptations of becoming involved in dangerous or criminal activities primarily due to their hopes for a future that involves playing sports in college. Both boys expressed that basketball is much too important to risk losing to bad choices. When I asked Cornell how

he has managed to keep himself out of the drug problems that exist in his neighborhood, he replied:

I stay on the basketball court! I give a lot of credit to [friend's name] because . . . when I thought about tryin' [drugs], [friend's name] came back and pulled me, like, 'Come on, man, let's go play basketball.' That freed—that made my time go by, playin' basketball, instead of bein' outside on the corner.

Clearly, meaningful participation has provided more than simply an athletic outlet for these adolescents. They have made the connection between the positive aspects of involvement in sports with positive decision-making. If the co-researchers in this study continue to apply this insight and awareness as they move forward into their futures, they should continue to enjoy the kind of success that sports has allowed them to experience in their lives thus far.

#### Interpreting Finding No. 3: Strong Connection with at Least One Adult – “Merchants of Hope”

It is well documented that adolescents benefit from having at least one supportive and caring adult in their lives. In the African American community, having a supportive and attentive family member has been found to correlate with fewer internalizing and externalizing child behaviors (Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, Zapert, & Maton, 2000). All five co-researchers in the present study indicated a strong and supportive connection with at least one adult—in some cases a family member, in some cases an adult outside the adolescent's family. In all cases, a definitive protective factor in the lives of the

adolescents participating in this study who reside in a high-risk neighborhood involved having a dependable relationship with at least one adult.

James, the only participant who lives with both his mother and his father, indicated several times throughout our interview that he considered his father to be his best friend. Though James' father provides consequences for any wrongdoing, James stated, "I can talk to him about anything. That's why I feel like he's my best friend right now." He also reflected on having both parents in the house, and from his perspective, sees the importance of having both a mother and father present. James shared, "... and they certain things that a son won't go to talk to their mother about. That's why I guess the dad there. That's why I feel like it's real important that both your parents in the house." During this part of our interview, James proudly indicated that his father is not only his best friend, but also acts as a positive role model for James' close friend whose father lives in another state.

So my dad's not tryin' to step in line like he's [friend's] dad, but he's tryin' to be like [friend's] best friend and guide him through like he's doin' us. That's why I feel like it's real important to have somebody else.

Like, a male or a female role model in your life.

Cornell, James, and Antwone indicated having a significant relationship with a coach. In Antwone's case, he has received input and advice over the years from his football coach and has come to greatly value this relationship. When I questioned Antwone about how other people in his life have helped him through any difficult or hard times, he shared:

'Cause I was always getting in trouble and [coach] always sittin' there telling me what to do, 'cause I have a future ahead of me. He said, 'don't

be doin' stupid things' because he said I have a bright future. . . . He was always there to tell me, 'cause to me, [coach] is like a father to me 'cause . . . growin' up, I didn't have a father 'cause to me he was not a father. And [coach] would sit down and tell us how things were or he would tell us how, if you did something, what would be the outcome. And he was just always there for me. . . . He's the type of person I could never lie to. I could always tell him the straight truth, and he'd never think anything else about me. . . . He helped me out a lot. Since I first started here. He was always there.

Cornell and James shared similar sentiments involving their head basketball coach.

James' comments centered around the influence his coach's words have had on him. “. . .

Our coach says every day in practice, 'There is two roads. One was less traveled. Take the less traveled road. Go by yourself. Don't follow everybody. Be a leader. Don't be a follower.'" Cornell, whose father lives in another state, shared:

So I feel like I'm closer to Coach, sometimes, than I am to my parents.

'Cause my dad is in Detroit. I don't really see him. . . . He [coach] knows that my dad's not here . . . I'm not sayin' he's tryin to *be* my dad, but he's, he's there. He always tellin' me, 'I'm there if you need me.' If I need anything, just talk to him.

Michael shared that it is the relationship he has with a cousin that is the most significant to him. After Michael's father passed away and his attempts at living with his mother failed because of her rapidly increasing drinking, Michael's uncle (his father's brother) invited him to live with him. Since that time, Michael has focused almost

entirely on his school work and on increasing and developing his basketball skills.

Michael shared that he spends a great deal of time with his cousin, who takes him to the local YMCA every day after school to practice and play basketball. In addition to his cousin providing encouragement for his athletic endeavors, Michael also shared that he is regularly encouraged to do well in school. “My cousin has just been on me so much this year about going to college, and I really want to. That’s my number one goal is to get into college.” It must also be noted that several times throughout our interview, Michael mentioned the influence that his deceased father has had on the positive choices Michael continues to make. “I guess—it’s just my dad. Like, every time drugs or something is around me, I just try to remember what he’s telling me, or looking down on me or something like that. And I just end up not doin’ it.” At another point, Michael recalled his mother’s cautions, “. . . ‘remember what your dad would say,’” to which Michael shared, “and so, I’d just straighten up.”

Derrick discussed two significant relationships in his life. The first is with his grandmother, now deceased, who took him in and raised him after his mother and father abandoned him as a small child, and the second is Derrick’s relationship with God. Derrick recalls how he came to have “rules” by which he tries to live. “My grandma, before she died, she told me just, ‘Take time to think.’ She always said, ‘Think.’ ‘Cause I used to do dumb things . . . my grandma told me never say, ‘I don’t care,’ so I don’t. I just started carin’ about things and think before you do things.” Derrick also shared the significance that God has had on his life choices. “If I would have came up without believing about God, or, like, knowin’ what’s good and what’s not, I’d probably be locked up right now. Really, a lot of it would have killed me.” He recalled that he “was

real Christian like” by the age of six and has a moral compass by which he tries to live, attending church services when he is not scheduled to work. When I asked him how being at church has helped him, Derrick replied, “I just feel relief. I don’t know what it is.”

Indications from my co-researchers contribute to the existing literature that identifies the significance that one adult can have on the healthy development of an adolescent. Earlier in this study, I borrowed Kuykendall’s (2004) term, “Merchants of Hope,” to describe the adults who take an interest in the lives of adolescents when others might dismiss them as “hopeless” or “bad.” After analyzing insights and ponderings from my co-researchers on this topic, there is solid evidence that a significant adult-adolescent relationship does, indeed, act as a protective factor in helping adolescents from a high-risk environment continue on a healthy developmental path by providing safety, friendship, encouragement, support, direction, and hope.

#### Interpreting Finding No. 4: The Friendship Connection

Considerable evidence and theoretical support exists to support the idea that adolescent friendships have a unique and significant impact on the long-term social development of youth (Hartup, 1996). Indeed, the last 20 years are marked by a growing body of literature that addresses the positive effects of friends (Berndt, 1996; Bukowski & Hoza, 1989; Furman, 1996; Parker & Asher, 1993). It should come as no surprise, then, that all five co-researchers in this study shared evidence that describes the positive connection they each enjoy with friends that act as protective factors in these adolescents’ lives. For example, it was noted in the last section that Cornell attributes his ability to resist selling and using drugs to a close friend who has literally removed Cornell from tempting situations. “A couple friends, you know, that, uh, they watch out for me. They

tell me, ‘ya know, nigga’, you don’t need to be doin’ that’ . . . They keep me out of trouble.” Likewise, Antwone shared that it was a friend whose supportive words helped him to realize his strength of character. His friend told him, “. . . you know, you’re a pretty strong dude ‘cause like, technically, I don’t know one dude who’d sit there and try to go to school every day . . . being on his own since fourteen.” When Antwone recalled his friend’s words to him, his self-pride was apparent. When Derrick shared information about his friends, it came in the form of positive peer influence. “. . .seein’ what my friends is doing. Like, seein’ them try to accomplish things makes me work harder so that I can be in that position. . .” When Michael discussed the influences that have helped him deal with difficulties or hard times, he recalled, “I just hang around my friends ‘cause they make me laugh, and I make them laugh . . .” I then asked directly how they [friends] are able to help, and Michael responded, “When I’m around everybody else, I just laugh and have fun and don’t think about nothin’ else.” Finally, James mentioned close friendships as primary influences that have helped him to not fall victim to the streets.

When I’m outside, I usually hang out with [friend], ‘cause I know, like me and him, we’re real close, like we brothers. And he’ll keep me in line or something. Tryin’ to do somethin’ that I know I ain’t got no business doin’ . . . I try to hang out with people that I know that’s not out there doin’ things that they shouldn’t do. Like, selling drugs. Like, smokin’ crack, or whatever. So I try to hang out with it, like, and my true niggers, like, they’re real close to me so, yeah . . .

As mentioned in an earlier section of this Chapter, James has the added benefit of enjoying valued friendships with his father and younger brother. Crosnoe, et al. (2003)



researched adolescent friendships and discovered that the potential protective role of friends had even more of a positive impact when the friends in question liked school and did well in school. This particular quality in friends was intimated only by Michael. Nonetheless, the close, personal bonds the co-researchers in this study enjoyed with their friends have served to protect them from dangerous activities, negative choices, and social isolation, and continued to offer the co-researchers personal support and encouragement.

#### Implications for School Counselors and Other Educators

The findings of this study result in a wealth of implications for school counselors and others involved in the education of African American male adolescents, specifically and all students, generally. Insofar as they correlate with the four primary findings of this study, implications will be discussed in this section. Though findings from this study may not be generalizable to all African American male adolescents, the information gleaned from the co-researchers of this study can begin to inform school counselors and other educators who work with this population of youth and can begin to provide insights into protective factors that facilitate and support school success in students living in high-risk neighborhoods.

The first finding that was discussed in this Chapter was the satisfaction of the three psychological needs outlined in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000)—autonomy, competence, and relatedness. School counselors are perfectly positioned to assist adolescents in working to meet these needs. By working individually or in a group setting, school counselors can apply strategies that begin to address the affective, cognitive, and behavioral components that establish an individual's self-determination.

Hoffman (1994) outlines five major components that should be addressed when working with students in this regard: (1) know yourself, (2) value yourself, (3) plan, (4) act, and (5) experience outcomes and learn (p. 3). In order to help develop a strong sense of autonomy, school counselors can work to help adolescents develop the first two components by facilitating discovery of students' strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and needs. Additionally, school counselors can assist students in learning to value themselves by helping them practice self-acceptance, self-care, and self-admiration of their uniqueness. By helping adolescents with just these two components, school counselors can begin to lay a foundation from which adolescents can begin to build healthy and positive attitudes towards themselves and others. School counselors can also help adolescents plan, act, and experience outcomes and learn by conducting classroom guidance lessons that address these topics or by working individually on these issues. Helping students develop autonomy is well within the reach of the school counselor's influence.

Competence and relatedness can likewise be developed with the help of a school counselor, as school counselors have access to the hidden strengths and talents of adolescents within a school system. Regular conversations with faculty and staff can provide insights into student strengths that can then be encouraged and supported. Similarly, school counselors can educate faculty, administration, and staff on the importance of developing in students a sense of competence and relatedness and by providing examples on how this can be accomplished in the classroom and in the school community as a whole. By working with school administration—those probably in the best position to effect the overall climate of a school—school counselors can be

influential and instrumental in helping develop school-wide programs that help instill self-determination in all students.

The second theme that was found to be a protective factor for the adolescents who participated in this study was meaningful participation. Along with helping to instill self-determination in students, school counselors are effectively positioned to help students become meaningful participants within the community of the school. Most high schools offer programs or extracurricular activities in the creative arts, in athletics, in service-related organizations, and in academic venues. School counselors can work with faculty to ensure that students are appropriately informed and encouraged to participate in those activities that best fit the adolescents' skills, talents, personal preferences, and personalities. In this way, all students could begin to develop a sense of connectedness and relatedness to their schools and the people within the schools, and loneliness and isolation might eventually become eradicated.

The third theme—having a strong connection with at least one adult—was identified as a protective factor for the co-researchers in this study. Four of the five young men felt a strong bond with an athletic coach. All five experienced valuable connections and relationships with a family member. School counselors, by working with the faculty and administration, are again favorably positioned to facilitate positive mentoring relationships. The intensive individualized attention that school counselors often provide can develop the type of interpersonal relationship that is so necessary to some youth. One of my favorite and most rewarding responsibilities as a school counselor is the personal relationships I develop with students throughout the course of their high school experience. These relationships often continue beyond graduation. School counselors can

promote or develop mentoring programs within the school utilizing teachers, staff, and coaches. Within the community, multi-agency collaboration could be a powerful way in which school counselors could further develop mentoring programs so that all youth could experience the benefits of having a caring, supportive, and non-judgmental relationship with an adult. School counselors can work to link adolescents with existing community programs such as those offered by the YMCA or Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Faith-based mentoring programs exist in many communities for which school counselors can share information with adolescents. Local colleges and employers often provide mentoring programs that link adolescents with those in the college or work force for academic support or career-related mentoring, respectively. Finally, school counselors can work with families to help reengage parents with their adolescent children. A lofty task, but one that is necessary to enhance the lives of today's youth. In order to facilitate the type of protective factors experienced by the co-researchers in this study, school counselors must draw from a variety of resources with the school and within the broader community.

The final theme that emerged as a protective factor for the African American male adolescents who participated in this study was a strong bond with their friends. Though friendships are primarily formed prior to students arriving at a high school, school counselors can help facilitate friendships when the opportunity arises. For example, when new students move into a school district from another state or transfer in from a neighboring school district, school counselors are often the first person a new student encounters. At this point, opportunities exist for a school counselor to introduce the new student to attending students or to ask students if they would show a new student around

school or invite a new student to sit with them at lunch. Facilitating therapeutic social groups for those students who may feel like outsiders or socially awkward could also result in the development of new friendships. These are small examples of ways in which a school counselor can begin to facilitate friendships among the student body of a school. Adolescents can also be encouraged to make new friendships by becoming involved in the mentoring programs discussed previously. Though many adolescents enjoy the personal, social, and emotion resources that result in successful and happy experiences in high school, school counselors would be remiss if they did not pool from the abundant resources offered by faculty, staff, administration, families, and the community at large to maximize the opportunities for a positive adolescent experience for *all* youth.

#### Cultural Considerations

The population involved in this study was comprised of five African American male adolescents. By focusing on this population of youth, this investigation, to some degree, can be viewed as a multiculturally-oriented inquiry since the findings of this body of research expand the knowledge base about the population of African American youth who reside in a high-risk neighborhood. It is important to acknowledge that school counselors, when working with any population of adolescents, must be culturally sensitive, whether to an adolescent's race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status. Cultural competencies can make or break the experience of an adolescent's interactions with school counselors or other educators, and it would be wise for school counselors to assess and develop a firm understanding of their own cultural biases and generalizations before attempting to work with any population of youth. One of the strongholds of the school counseling profession is advocacy (ASCA, 2006), and

school counselors who are able to understand and empathize with the culturally-sensitive issues that exist for students who, for example, reside in high-risk neighborhoods are well-positioned to advocate on behalf of these students when called upon to do so. Specifically, in-service day programs, or workshops for teachers, staff, parents or employers that address issues such as self-determination, meaningful participation, and the need for a strong relationship with an adult could all result in productive opportunities for school counselors to begin to educate others in these and other important areas.

### Hypotheses Generated

This section reviews the major hypotheses that emerged in this investigation. All hypotheses relate to the themes that emerged as protective factors in the lives of African American male adolescents who, despite living in a high-risk neighborhood, experience school success. The following hypothesis emerged from the discussion: (a) the degree to which adolescents who live in a high-risk neighborhood experience school success is related to the degree to which the three psychological needs of self-determination (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) are met; (b) adolescents who experience meaningful participation in athletic endeavors are better able to cope with some of the stressors and temptations that come from living in a high-risk neighborhood and from life stressors in general; (c) adolescents who have a meaningful relationship with at least one adult feel supported and feel that they have somewhere to turn if they are in need of help; and (d) adolescents who have strong connections with their friends feel a sense of sameness with others who can understand the circumstances in which they live and rely on friends for companionship, strength to resist negative temptations, and caring and support.

## Recommendations for Additional Research

Several recommendations for additional research emerged from the findings of this investigation. The most prominent question for consideration involves gaining a greater understanding of protective factors present in the lives of African American male adolescents who live in a high-risk neighborhood by conducting the same type of investigation with adolescents who live in identified high-risk neighborhoods other than Milltown. Given the diminutive size of Milltown, I wondered throughout the investigation if adolescents from larger, inner city, high-risk neighborhoods who experience success at school might have similar protective factors present in their lives, or if living in a larger neighborhood results in a different set of challenges and therefore a different set of protective factors to the youth who reside there.

Several other questions emerged in the discussion of results from this inquiry. The following questions provide direction for continuing the examination of protective factors within African American male adolescents: (a) Are there inherent personal qualities or characteristics that play a significant role in the outcome of adolescents within this minority group who enjoy school success? (b) What protective factors exist for minority male students who attend Hope High School but who do not reside in the high-risk neighborhood of Milltown? (c) What protective factors exist in the African American male adolescents who reside in Midland, were finishing their first year at Hope High School and were, therefore, not selected to participate in this study? (d) To what extent, if any, does the role of a school counselor play in the school success of a population of African American male adolescents who reside in a high-risk neighborhood? (e) In what ways can school personnel, administration, staff, and coaches provide act as further

support systems for African American male adolescents who reside in high-risk neighborhoods? (f) What barriers exist that prevent African American male adolescents who reside in a high-risk neighborhood from experiencing success in school? Examining these questions will help ensure that African American male adolescents receive the maximum support and attention that can reasonably be offered from school counselors and others working within educational systems. Putting into practice the type of supports that promote protective factors for this group of minority adolescents can result in the positive development of emotional, social, and personal mental health.

### Conclusion

The intent of this investigation was to address the question: What protective factors exist in African American male adolescents that facilitate or support school success, despite living in a high-risk neighborhood? In order to answer this question, I conducted five individual interviews with African American male adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19, who all reside in Milltown—a neighborhood identified as high-risk, and who all attend the same high school. These adolescents seemed perfectly suited to share details of their life experiences that would begin to shed light on the answer to the question under investigation. Co-researchers were open and honest in the telling of their stories and shared resplendent details and insights that helped illuminate the answer to the research question driving this study.

Fairly consistent findings emerged from the co-researchers. It was discovered that four basic themes determined the types of protective factors that supported these individuals' abilities to experience school success. They are: (a) the satisfaction of needs outlined by SDT (autonomy, competence, relatedness); (b) opportunities for meaningful



participation; (c) a strong connection with at least one adult; and (d) a strong connection with friends. These findings offer insight for school counselors and others who work in educational environments with adolescents who hail from high-risk neighborhoods.

Approaching any group of adolescents with a robust understanding of how and why they function as they do positions school counselors and other educators to provide the most relevant services and to engage in the most productive and helpful type of interactions and interventions.

## Epilogue

At the time of this research project, Cornell, James, and Antwone were seniors in high school. I am proud to share that all three graduated from high school in June 2007. Antwone was the first member of his family to receive a high school diploma, and he is scheduled to move to another state where he will attend college and continue his athletic endeavors. Cornell and James have both been accepted to the same college and plan to pursue degrees while playing basketball at the college level. Derrick will enter his senior year in the fall of 2007 and plans to attend college after graduation next year. Shortly after Michael participated in this research study, his mother passed away from a prolonged illness. He will continue to reside with his uncle. He will enter his junior year in the fall of 2007 and, after high school, plans to continue his studies towards a degree in education. Michael will continue to be a starter on the high school basketball team and hopes to lead his team to a second section championship.

The sixth student who initially agreed to participate in this study abruptly moved out of state with his family before the study began.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Individual Interviews**



## **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS**

Tell me about yourself. What do you like to do for fun?

Have you had to overcome any problems or hard times in your life?

What kinds of problems or hard times have you had to overcome? Think back as far as you can in answering.

What are the kinds of things you have done to help yourself in dealing with any of these problems or hard times? How has that helped?

Can you think of other things that have helped you deal with problems or hard times?

Have there been other people in your life who have helped you when you've experienced problems or hard times? Again, think back as far as you can in answering.

What was it about those relationships that helped you to deal with the problem or hard times?

What did others say or do that you viewed as being helpful?

What has your high school experience been like for you?

What kinds of things do you experience at school that helps you be successful?

What kinds of things do you experience at school that might get in the way of you being more successful?

What do you see yourself doing in the next year?

Is there anything else you can tell me that would help me better understand your ability to overcome problems or hard times that you haven't already talked about?

**APPENDIX B**

Invitation To Participate In A Research Study  
For Students 18 Years Or Older



DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY  
Department of Counseling, Psychology & Special Education  
CANEVIN HALL  
PITTSBURGH, PA 15282

TEL 412.396.6112  
FAX 412.396.1340

**INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY  
FOR STUDENTS 18 YEARS OR OLDER**

Dear Potential Participant:

I have received permission from the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects to study the topic of resilience and protective factors in African American male adolescents who reside in the Midland neighborhood. Resilience simply means a person's ability to overcome difficulties in hard times.

I am writing to invite you to participate in a study investigating resilience and protective factors that exist in your life that have helped you overcome difficulties or hard times. Insights gained from my study will contribute to the research literature related to resilience and protective factors in the African American male adolescent population. Additionally, information gathered may be used to make recommendations for interventions and programs utilized by school counselors and other educators in their interactions with African American male students. These recommendations will be made available to you at the close of the study, upon request.

Participants in the study will be asked to be part of an individual interview, lasting between 1 and 1 ½ hours and will be asked to complete a very brief form with information such as age, grade level in school, etc.. All participants will be assigned a code that is known to no one except me, and although the interviews will be tape-recorded, the recording will be heard only by me. Within three months of the completion of the study, all audiotapes, transcripts, and other documentation will be destroyed. All responses and identities of participants will be kept strictly confidential. If individuals decide not to take part in the study or change their minds at any time during the study, they will not encounter any penalty, and data collected from those participants will be shredded or otherwise destroyed.

If you agree to participate in my research study, I will ask that you read and sign the enclosed Consent to Participate form. Thank you very much for considering this request, and I look forward to hearing from you. I can be reached at: 412-848-1327 (cell) or by

email at: cthomas400@comcast.net. Additionally, feel free to contact my dissertation committee chairperson, Dr. Lisa Lopez Levers (office – 412-396-1871; email – levers@duq.edu), or Dr. Paul Richer, Chairperson of Duquesne University’s Institutional Review Board (office – 412-396-6326; email – richer@duq.edu) with any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Carol A. Thomas, M.S.Ed., LPC, NCC  
Doctoral Candidate, Department of Counseling, Psychology, and Special Education

**APPENDIX C**

Invitation To Participate In A Research Study  
To Parents/Guardians Of Students Who Are Under  
18 Years Of Age



DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY  
Department of Counseling, Psychology & Special Education  
CANEVIN HALL  
PITTSBURGH, PA 15282

TEL 412.396.6112  
FAX 412.396.1340

**INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY  
TO PARENTS/GUARDIANS OF STUDENTS WHO ARE UNDER  
18 YEARS OF AGE**

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I have received permission from the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects to study the topic of resilience and protective factors in African American male adolescents who reside in the Midland neighborhood. Resilience simply means a person's ability to overcome difficulties in hard times.

I am writing to invite your child to participate in a study that will investigate resilience and protective factors that may have helped him overcome difficulties or hard times he may have experienced so far in his life. Insights gained from my study will contribute to the research literature related to resilience and protective factors in the African American male adolescent population. Additionally, information gathered may be used to make recommendations for interventions and programs utilized by school counselors and other educators in their interactions with individuals in this population.

Participants in the study will be asked to be part of an individual interview, lasting between 1 and 1 ½ hours and will be asked to complete a very brief form with information such as age, grade level in school, etc. All participants will be assigned a code that is known to no one except me, and although the interviews will be tape-recorded, the recording will be heard only by me. Within three months of the completion of the study, all audiotapes, transcripts, and other documentation will be destroyed. All responses and identities of participants will be kept strictly confidential, and no one reading the results of the study will know the identity of any of the participants. If individuals decide not to take part in the study or change their minds at any time during the study, they will not encounter any penalty, and data collected from those participants will be shredded or otherwise destroyed.

I have enclosed an Assent to Participate form that has more information about my study. If you agree to allow your child to participate, I will ask that you and your child sign this

form. Thank you very much for considering this request, and I look forward to hearing from you. I can be reached at: 412-848-1327 (cell) or by email at: cthomas400@comcast.net. Additionally, feel free to contact my dissertation committee chairperson, Dr. Lisa Lopez Levers (office – 412-396-1871; email –levers@duq.edu), or Dr. Paul Richer, Chairperson of Duquesne University’s Institutional Review Board (office – 412-396-6326; email – richer@duq.edu) with any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Carol A. Thomas, M.S.Ed., LPC, NCC  
Doctoral Candidate, Department of Counseling, Psychology, and Special Education

**APPENDIX D**

Consent To Participate In A Research Study

For Students Age 18 Or Older





DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY  
Department of Counseling, Psychology & Special Education  
CANEVIN HALL  
PITTSBURGH, PA 15282

TEL 412.396.6112  
FAX 412.396.1340

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY  
FOR STUDENTS AGE 18 OR OLDER**

**TITLE:** School Success Among African American Male Adolescents:  
An Existential Examination of Protective Factors.

**INVESTIGATOR:** Carol A. Thomas, M.S.Ed., LPC, NCC  
400 Maxwell Drive  
Pittsburgh, PA 15236  
(412) 848-1327 (cell) / (724) 643-8500 (work)  
cthomas400@comcast.net

**ADVISOR:** Dr. Lisa Lopez Levers  
Duquesne University  
Department of Counseling, Psychology and Special Education  
110 F Canevin Hall  
(412) 396-1871  
levers@duq.edu

**SOURCE OF SUPPORT:** This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in the Executive Counselor Education and Supervision Program at Duquesne University.

**PURPOSE:** You are being asked to participate in this research study because you are an African American male adolescents who lives in the Midland neighborhood. I am interested in studying successful students to learn how they may have handled difficult times in their lives.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a very short form asking your age, your grade, the number of years you have lived in Midland, and who lives in your household (for example: grandmother, brother, aunt).

You will also be asked to talk individually with me in a tape recorded individual interview that will last approximately 1-1 ½ hours. During your interview, I will be asking you questions about yourself, your experiences in school, your experiences dealing with any problems or hard times you may have experienced in your life, and asking for any other information that you would like me to know about your life experiences. These are the only requests that will be made of you.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:**

Risks of participating in this study are minimal, but may include sad feelings when talking about your past experiences. However, these risks are not believed to exceed those that may be encountered in daily activities. Students will be encouraged to contact the school counselor if they are in any way upset by the interview.

Although you may not experience any personal benefits of the study, the research will provide information that will help school counselors and other educators work more effectively with African American male adolescents who may have experienced difficulties or hard times in their lives.

**COMPENSATION:**

There will be no compensation associated with this study. At the same time, participation in the project will require no cost to you.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Your name and identity will be kept confidential. All written materials and consent forms will be stored in a secured file in the researcher's home office. When audiotapes are transcribed, all references to you or anyone you talk about will be coded. Only the researcher, Carol A. Thomas, will have access to the code that identifies you. Within three months of the completion, defense, and approval of my dissertation, all audiotapes, transcripts, and other relevant records will be destroyed.

**RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:**

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw at any time and should you choose to withdraw, you may request that the information that has already been collected be destroyed.

If you chose not to participate or to withdraw from the study, there are **no** consequences to you. This study has no impact on your grades at school and is not connected to your school work in any way.

If you have any questions or are in any way dissatisfied with the process of the research study or believe you have been harmed or injured because of it, you may contact the researcher, Carol A. Thomas at 412-848-1327 (cell); 724-643-8500 (work); email – cthomas400@comcast.net. You also may contact Dr. Lisa Lopez Levers, the dissertation advisor for this study (office – 412-396-1871; email – levers@duq.edu) or Dr. Paul Richer, Chairperson of Duquesne University’s Institutional Review Board (office – 412-396-6326; email – richer@duq.edu).

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS:**

A summary of the results of the study will be available to you at the completion of the study at no cost to you, upon request.

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT:**

I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. On these terms, I state that I am willing to participate in this research project. There will be no adverse consequences should I decide not to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant’s Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher’s Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**APPENDIX E**

Assent To Participate In A Research Study

For Students Under The Age Of 18



DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY  
Department of Counseling, Psychology & Special Education  
CANEVIN HALL  
PITTSBURGH, PA 15282

TEL 412.396.6112  
FAX 412.396.1340

**ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY  
FOR STUDENTS UNDER THE AGE OF 18**

Participant \_\_\_\_\_ IRB Approval Number \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator Carol A. Thomas, M.S.Ed., LPC, NCC  
Name Credentials

PI's Phone # 412-848-1327

Title of Project: School Success Among African American Male Adolescents:  
An Existential Examination of Protective Factors

I am trying to learn more about the ways in which African American male adolescents are able to deal with problems or hard times that they have experienced during their lives. I am asking if you would be willing to be in a research study to help me learn more about people or things that have helped you overcome problems or hard times during your life. You can ask questions about the research project at any time, and you can say no at any time. Your parent/guardian has received a letter that explains more about what it would mean for you to help with this research study. Because you are under the age of 18, I will need to have your parent/guardian initial the bottom of this form saying that it is okay with them that you be in this study.

**What does it mean to be in a research study?**

There are many reasons why people agree to participate in research. Sometimes people take part in research studies simply to help researchers learn more about a particular topic.

**Why YOU are invited.**

You are being invited to participate in this research study because you are an African American male adolescent who lives in the Midland neighborhood. I am interested in studying successful students who live in your neighborhood to learn how they may have handled difficult times in their lives.

### **What will happen?**

If you agree to participate in my research project, I will schedule a meeting with you to answer any questions you may have. You will be asked to complete a very short form asking your age, your grade, the number of years you have lived in Midland, and who lives in your household (for example: grandmother, brother, aunt). We will pick a date, time, and location for your interview that will last between 1 and 1 ½ hours. I will tape record the interview so that I can listen to it again later. During your interview, I will be asking you questions about yourself, your experiences in school, your experiences dealing with any problems or hard times you may have experienced in your life, and any other information that you would like me to know about your life experiences.

### **Can anything bad happen to me?**

Risks of participating in my study are few, but may include sad feelings when talking about your past experiences. If at any time during your interview you would like to stop or take a break, just let me know. Students will be encouraged to contact the school counselor if they are in any way upset by the interview.

### **What good will the study do?**

Researchers usually hope that their research will benefit somebody. My research will provide information that can be used by school counselors and other educators so that they can interact better with African American male adolescents who may have experienced or overcome problems or hard times in their lives.

### **Will anyone know I am in the study?**

Your participation in my research study will be kept confidential. This means that I will do my best to keep all of your information and answers private. Your information and answers will be kept locked up in my home office, and no one will have access to them except me. When the tapes of our interview are transcribed, all names will be changed so that people reading the study will not know your identity. Only those people at Duquesne University who are helping me with this study will know that you have participated.

Within three months after my study is complete, all audiotapes, transcripts, and other relevant records will be destroyed.

### **Can I withdraw from the study?**

Yes. You can withdraw from the study at any time with **no** consequences. This study will not affect your grades at school and is not connected to your school work in any way.

**Can I read the results of your study?**

A summary of the results of my study will be available to you at the completion of the study at no cost to you, upon request

**What if I have questions?**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research study, call me at 412-848-1327. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject, you can call my research committee chairperson, Dr. Lisa Lopez Levers, at Duquesne University, at 412-396-1871, or Dr. Paul Richer, Chairperson of Duquesne University's Institutional Review Board (office – 412-396-6326; email – richer@duq.edu).

**This form is valid only if the IRB's current stamp of approval is shown below.**

<b>If you have had all of your questions answered and agree to be in this research study, sign here:</b>	
_____	_____
Signature of Child	Date
_____	_____
Print Name of Child	Date
_____	_____
Signature of Witness	Date
_____	_____
Signature of Person Explaining Assent	Date
<i>A copy of this form has been given to me and my parent(s)/legal guardian(s)</i>	
_____ Initials of Parent(s)/Legal Guardian(s)	

**APPENDIX F**  
**Demographic Information**



## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Current Grade Level in School (*please circle one*):

Ninth Grade

Tenth Grade

Eleventh Grade

Twelfth Grade

3. Who lives in your household (Example: grandmother, brother, aunt – no names)?

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4. How long have you lived in Midland, PA? \_\_\_\_\_