Role of Nontraditional Family Support on African American Students’ College Experiences

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Abstract

There is a wealth of research supporting the notion that African American family members play a critical role in supporting African American students in their college experience. However, the majority of research investigating the impact of family support on the experiences of African American college students has focused on students from traditional family backgrounds. Therefore, studies examining family support among African American college students from nontraditional families are limited. This study employed qualitative methods to examine how family support influenced the academic experiences of African American college students. Participants were six African American junior and senior undergraduates attending a southeastern, predominately White institution. Findings suggest that the participants from nontraditional families are generally supported by their families while in college, but experience a lack of support for some academic and racial stressors. These findings have the potential to assist college administrators, faculty, and staff in understanding how to better support African American students from nontraditional families who attend predominately White institutions.
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In 2014, only 25% of all students seeking postsecondary degrees at a 4-year institution in North Carolina were African American, while 60% were Caucasian (Integrated Postsecondary Data System, 2014). In light of this stark discrepancy, researchers and educators have begun to study various factors that may shape the experiences of African American students, particularly at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). One such factor is family support (Gonzalez, 2002; Herdon & Hirt, 2004), which includes academic, emotional, social, and financial support (Herdon & Hirt, 2004) and has been documented as a fundamental factor in promoting positive academic success in the lives of children, youth, and young adults (Maramba & Palmer, 2011).

While family support may shape African American students’ college experiences, this process is not as well understood for students from nontraditional families. In this study, nontraditional families are characterized by divergence from the traditional family concept of a heterosexual man and woman who raise children under the legal laws of marriage (Shapiro, 1993). Examples include families with stepparents, cohabitating non-married parents, single parents, lesbian mothers, gay fathers, grandparents, foster parents, or other relatives (Shapiro, 1993). Ongoing changes in family composition in the United States (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002) highlight the need to examine the role of nontraditional families in shaping students’ college experiences. For example, between 1960 and 2016, the percentage of children living in two parent homes decreased from 88 to 69 (U.S Census, 2016). Furthermore, the nontraditional family may be particularly poignant for the African American community, as there is evidence to suggest that, for African American families, support from family often stems from nontraditional sources such as non-blood relatives (Kings, 2010; Kings, 2011).

My study draws upon Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1977) as a conceptual framework. This theory postulates that development is shaped by interactions among
multiple interacting environments that are salient to an individual’s life. Brofenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory argues that to truly understand human development, it is critical to consider the larger systems that contribute to this process (Brofenbrenner, 1994). Literature suggests that familial support and the academic context may represent two microsystems that affect a developing person as they are growing and changing with their immediate environment (Brofenbrenner, 1994; Griffin, 2006; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). In the context of the current study, family experiences and academic experiences may interact to shape students’ overall experiences. For example, family experiences such as the quality of support from family may shape the way in which African American students make sense of their educational environments (e.g., the quality of support from family in regards to reaching their academic goals). This study aims to investigate the experiences of nontraditional students in a college environment, while also understanding the effects their family’s support has on these experiences.

**African American College Students Attending PWIs**

The college setting arguably represents one of the most pertinent settings to examine the influence of family support among African Americans given their unique experiences within this context. Historically, African American students on the campus of PWIs have been excluded and reported increased academic and social challenges (Harper, 2013). In addition, African American students enrolled in PWIs report increased race-related stress (e.g., racial discrimination, negative stereotypes; (Chavous, Harris, Rivas, Helaire & Green, 2004; Harper, 2013; Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2011) in addition to typical social and academic challenges associated with college (Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008).

Clark and colleagues (1999) posited that racism as a stressor can have significant effects on the social and psychological well-being of African American young adults. In addition, to
psychological outcomes, the negative effects that race-related stress can also give rise to feelings of alienation, in addition to strained relationships with White peers and faculty (Maramba & Palmer, 2011), especially within a PWI. These stressors can be taxing on students and affect their performance both in and out of the classroom (Chavous et al., 2004; Harper, 2013; Smith et al., 2011). For example, Barnett (2004) reported that many African American students within PWIs reported increased “daily struggles and recurring crisis” as a result of their identities as African American students at a PWI. This is consistent with research that has documented a positive association between the number of daily race-related “hassles” that African American students experience and levels of depression (Barnett, 2004). These findings suggest that more research is needed to understand how best to support African American students at PWIs.

**Family Support Among African American Students**

There is evidence to suggest that family support may play a unique role in mitigating the challenges African American students must negotiate while at a PWI. For example, research suggests that African American family relationships may serve as a buffer against racism, discrimination, and oppression (Barnett, 2004; Coates, 1987). This is in line with previous literature that has supported the need for African American college students to maintain a connection with communities they were involved in before college (Guiffrida, 2006; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maramba & Palmer, 2011). For example, Barnett (2004) found that family involvement among African American college students promoted social and intellectual intelligence, as well as decreased levels of stress regarding college.

Previous research has confirmed many themes regarding African American students’ academic success and their family’s influence. However, these data have mostly been collected on individuals from traditional households consisting of two heterosexual parents (Herdon &
Hirt, 2004). Some of these themes include family expectations, role models, sense of community, spiritual support and even factors of motivation (Herdon & Hirt, 2004). This research supports previous research that suggests African American students rely heavily on trusted family members to disclose and resolve sensitive and stressful issues (Herdon & Hirt, 2004). Through this lens, it is not surprising that family support has been theorized to play a crucial role among African American students from grade school to college (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Herdon & Hirt, 2004).

**Importance of Nontraditional Families**

Unfortunately, the majority of studies examining the relevance of family support has done so with a heavy emphasis on traditional two parent households (e.g., heterosexual individuals who are legally married with children who share both of their DNA; King, 2010). Given the extent to which family structure has begun to evolve, a more nuanced description of family and family support, as it pertains to African American college students’ experiences, is necessary. The consideration of nontraditional families may be particularly relevant for the African American community, as there is evidence to suggest that family support may look different for African Americans relative to majority group members. For example, scholars have described within many African American families the idea of kinship as a “collective responsibility” in which active parenting roles may be assumed by friends and relatives other than immediate parents (Kings, 2010; Kings, 2011). Thus, as posited by Auerbach (2007), the concept of parent involvement should be reconceptualized to also consider the roles of nontraditional family groups and members.
Limitations

In addition to understanding the role of family support, how it may look different for African American students from nontraditional families, and its impact on students’ college experiences, an important methodological limitation must be addressed. To date, research exploring the role of family support has relied heavily on quantitative techniques. While important, quantitative techniques alone may not fully capture the complexities that are involved in understanding the experiences of African American students (Guiffrida, 2004). Qualitative methods may highlight multiple elements of African American students’ experience to provide a “fuller” description of events (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 36) that is not provided by quantitative methods alone.

Current Study

This study employs qualitative methods to understand how family support may influence and shape the experiences of African American students from nontraditional family backgrounds attending a PWI. This approach allows the researcher to identify similar thoughts and feelings amongst African American students from nontraditional parent households in order to shed light on the role of family support in shaping student experiences at a PWI. In this paper, college experiences include both conversations from the moment participants begin thinking about college, in addition to their lived experiences on campus. One overarching research question spearheaded the current work: How does family support from nontraditional homes influence the psychological, social, and academic experiences of African American college students attending a PWI. As an initial step in understanding how nontraditional family support works to influence college experiences, it is first important to understand the experiences of African American students on a predominately White campus. Thus, two sub-questions helped to further guide the
analysis: (1) What are African American students’ experiences like as minorities on the campus of a PWI; and (2) What role does their nontraditional family play in how they navigate campus as a minority?

Method

Participants

Participants were 6 self-identified African American female college students attending a southeastern, public PWI in the United States. African American students comprise 8% of the 18,350 undergraduate students enrolled at the institution where the data were collected. Participants identified their families as nontraditional based on either parental marital status or who was living in their household. Participants were either 20 or 21 years of age during the time of the interview. Four of the participants of the sample were enrolled in their junior year, and two were enrolled in their senior year. Five out of the six participants were first generation college students. Below I describe each participant (using pseudonyms) who participated in the interviews.

Dana, 20 years old

A junior student from a single-parent household who attended a relatively diverse high school in North Carolina. Dana grew up with both a mother and father in the household before financial troubles caused her parents to get a divorce and her mother raised her on her own. Her mom is from Trinidad and never had a personal experience with the United States school system, granting Dana the privilege of being the first person in her family to go to college.

Karmen, 21 years old
A senior student from a single-parent household who attended a predominately Black high school in North Carolina. She grew up with her mom and twin brother in a predominately Black town and leans heavily on her grandparents for financial support even though her mother is there for her emotionally. Karmen is a first generation college student and hopes that her college degree can show others in her small town what is possible.

_Dasha, 20 years old_

A junior student from North Carolina who was raised by her mother, aunt, and grandmother. Her mom remarried when she was older and now her stepdad does play a part in her life. She is a first generation college student and went to a predominately Black high school.

_Kiya, 20 years old_

A junior student from North Carolina who was raised by her mom, stepdad, and grandma. Kiya went to a predominately Black high school and considers herself a first generation college student because her mother went to a nontraditional college while Kiya was in middle school.

_Erica, 20 years old_

A senior student from North Carolina who attended the same “racially diverse” high school as Dana. Erica was raised by her mom and stepdad while also maintaining a close relationship with her biological father and stepmother. Both of Erica’s parents received college degrees from four-year universities.

_Asia, 20 years old_
A junior student from Arizona who was raised by both her mother and godmother who play a very influential role in her life. Asia is biracial and the first person to go to college on her dad’s side of the family, and she takes pride in this great accomplishment.

**Procedure**

Data from the participants were collected to examine the experiences of junior and senior African American college students attending a PWI. Following university Institutional Review Board approval, six participants were selected using convenience snowball sampling through a network of students. The remaining participants were selected based upon their response to a flier in which they were prescreened to ensure that they fit the requirements for the study. Students were then contacted via email and given a description about the study as well as information for setting up an appointment to be interviewed. In order to be eligible for the study, students had to self-identify as African American, be a college junior or senior at the university where the study was conducted, and consider their immediate family structure to be nontraditional. Participants read an informed consent document and gave verbal consent to being recorded during the interview. They were made aware that their real names would not be used in the study. The individual interviews took approximately thirty minutes and were recorded in order to be transcribed for further analysis. Each interview was recorded using a tape recorder and then uploaded onto a secure drive on a computer. Following the completion of the interviews, participants were debriefed and compensated for their participation in the study.

**Measures**

The researcher developed an interview questionnaire categorized into three main sections including precollege influence, transition into college, and college experiences. See the
Appendix for interview guide. The first section included information regarding how influential each participant’s family was in their preparation for college, asking such questions as “How would you describe the conversations, if any that you and your family had about higher education when you were in high school?” The second section of the guide included questions regarding the transition from high school to college such as “What was the transition like for your family when you left home for college?” Participants were also asked to describe what support looked like from their families in addition to noting any changes in their family dynamics since they have been in college. The final section of the interview focused on participants’ experiences while at the PWI, including questions such as “Since your first year, how have you coped with stress while at school? What role has your family played in this process?”

Data Analysis

Following completion of the interviews, audio files were transcribed and printed out in order to facilitate data screening and coding. This process entailed the researcher re-playing each interview twice while simultaneously making notes on the transcripts and paying attention to any utterances or unusual pauses. Once various notes or memos were made on the transcripts, the researcher was able to read through each transcript again and highlight commonalities in comments that participants made. Within these similar phrases, codes were established to group together similar comments and dialogue from each participant. These phrases were color coded to assist in the organization of reoccurring themes across multiple interviews.

Results

The following sections describe the findings from the interviews and how African American students assess their college experiences. As mentioned previously, all six participants
self-identified as African American students from nontraditional families. Below, I report emergent themes from the interviews. Although the intent was to focus on nontraditional family support, participants were keen to discuss their experiences as minority students on a predominately White campus. As such, I describe participants’ college experiences as well as the nature of family support. In this study, college students’ experiences include both precollege conversations in addition to on campus experiences. Following description of college students precollege and on campus experiences, I describe the role of nontraditional family support as it relates to these experiences. Finally, I summarize students’ reflections on coping with stress while in school as it pertains to their experiences as African American students at a PWI.

**College Experiences**

**Pre-College.** In the first portion of the interviews students discussed how conversations surrounding college started in both their homes and school environments. All six of the participants mentioned a sense of expectations from either their school or families regarding attending a four-year university. Dana noted:

> So I think that it was obviously a necessity my parents were like you need to go to college but it was more so people around me talking about what colleges they were applying to. So I would literally live in the counselor’s office and I would just be in there constantly so I would say that my atmosphere played a huge part.

These conversations with classmates and guidance counselors allowed Dana to realize that she needed to look into college and the application process. Dasha and Asia were both first generation college students who also relied heavily on their guidance counselors to assist them in the college application process. In contrast, Erica’s parents went to college, and she knew what was expected
of her because of her mother’s background. She mentions that, for her, college was not even up for debate:

   It was expected. It was always kind of well when you go off to college, what do you want to study? I kind of always knew what I was going to do but it was never like “do you want to go to college”, it was always “where” and what are you going to do when you get there? Understanding these initial experiences around college attendance were important to appreciate the role of family support and its impact on college experiences.

   **College Experiences.** During the study, all six students discussed their experiences as minority students on the campus of a PWI. They all shared similar experiences both inside and outside of the classroom in addition to evolving relationships with their families. Oftentimes, the notion of being left out during their college experience was brought up whether it was at home or in the classroom. This next section focuses on these experiences.

   All but one of the students in this study expressed frustrations about being one of the few African American students in their classes. This lack of representation inside the classroom also affected how students believed they were perceived by the peers and professors, as both Erica and Kiya feared being called the “dumb black girl.”

   I feel like I can’t express myself you know? I don’t want to sound stupid. They’re all so eager to get their opinions out and I’m just like wow, like I just want to sit back and listen. It’s very intimidating sometimes.

   This fear surrounding speaking up in class conversations also came up in the interview with Dana as she mentioned:

   I think a lot of racial issues were going on and I think realizing that a lot more made it more difficult in my classes when I was the only black student. It’s so frustrating having
to be the black spokesperson and that’s not what I am. I’m not speaking for every African American out here.

The tone in her voice alluded to frustration about not seeing enough people who look like her both around campus and in her classes. Dasha added to these feelings by saying:

I walk into the room and I’m like there is no one else that looks like me so it’s like sometimes it can be a lonely feeling.

Race is not the only area where students talked about feelings of exclusion inside the classroom. There were times when class instruction was difficult for students to relate to because relevant examples were not being used. Karmen sounded frustrated when she shared an experience from a sociology class regarding “the traditional family” in America.

Sometimes I just feel like I don’t fit in and I’m not understood and there are certain classes where they can go through and talk about certain things that happened in their families and I’m just like that’s not everybody family that’s not my life experience.

It was clear in this interview that Karmen was referring to “their families” as her White counterparts whose families may often follow societal norms. Kiya also feels strongly that professors should be more understanding of family circumstances and perhaps could have tried to help her more. She said:

I really don’t feel supported here because the fall of my junior semester my cousin died and I reached out to my professors, you know I tried to help them to understand what I was going through but they were just like oh well…

The idea of being left out also trickled into home experiences as students highlighted how difficult it was to miss out on family related activities as they moved through their college journey.
It was difficult for Karmen to handle being away from home as she felt like she was missing out on family dinners and other events. Being that she is so close with her family, Karmen did not feel like she was able to properly balance the two as her grades began to slip during her first year.

They would have dinners and stuff and I couldn’t go because I had to stay here and study. So it was kind of hard at first and I think I still spent a lot of time going back and forth home and I started to see where it was taking a toll on my grades so I kind of had to pull back from that. So that was hard.

In addition to grades, Asia, the only out-of-state student, talked about a difficult decision she felt she had to make during her college experience. She was given the opportunity to study abroad and her mother pushed her to do so by reminding her “to take advantage of all of these opportunities because this is like what Carolina is.” However, Asia admits that this decision led her to feel left out of family events later on:

I’m pretty close to them but not physically close so a lot of things that go on at home make me feel like I’m separate like my decision to study abroad in India this summer made me miss my sister’s high school graduation so that was kind of unfortunate and it’s really stressful.

**Familial (and Non-Familial) Support**

After getting a sense of participants’ precollege and on campus experiences, I was interested in understanding how students spoke about the support they received throughout their college journeys. The following section describes different aspects of support that participants mentioned throughout their precollege and college experiences. Focal themes included: maternal support, absence of support, and support from others.
Maternal Support. In all six interviews, each participant mentioned that familial relationships and supports were important. Interestingly, the role of maternal support, emerged as the most salient form of familial support. Before coming to college, Asia’s mom did a lot for her to make sure she was made a well informed decision about where to attend college.

My mom throughout 90% of my childhood worked for the airlines so I fly benefits so I decided that I did not want to go in-state. So based on these benefits I took a tour of colleges in Oregon and then I had my godmother come with me and she flew me here and I did tours of UNC and Duke and some tours of some other in state colleges.

Once the participants were enrolled in college, they still spoke very highly of their mother’s support and encouragement to the best of their abilities. For example, Kiya elaborated on everything her mother does for her while she is in school because “sometimes it can get really hard”:

She is always there for me, she always wants to figure out something for me, she’ll take me grocery shopping, she’ll break her neck to make sure that I’m doing what I need to do, that I have what I need to have and it’s never enough for her. She’ll go out of her way to do anything and everything that she can for me so that’s really important. It lets me know that I don’t have to depend on anyone else expect for her.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Dasha, in her explanation of the inspiration and support she receives from her mother:

The reason I do come to college is because of her so without her sometimes I don’t know if I would see the need to come. I like college because I am trying to do better for my family. She has always been there ever since I’ve been in college like she’ll drop anything she is doing to like come help me if something is wrong.
In all six interviews, students clearly expressed their relationships with their families, especially their mothers. For these six African American women, the support of their mothers was critical to both their pre-college and current experiences.

**Absence of Support.** The role that their parents currently play in students’ college experiences is pivotal; however, despite the importance of parental support voiced throughout the interviews, participants also frequently reported the need for a different type of support that was often not provided by family members. This was particularly relevant in the context of the college application process, as five out of six of the students in this study emphasized the lack of parental involvement in the college application process. In some cases, this was not to insinuate that the parents were not supportive during their child’s application process, but more so that parents did not know to provide the assistance and support that child needed at that time. Dana mentioned in her interview:

> She didn’t really have like the U.S education experience so she wasn’t really able to help us in that arena just because obviously she didn’t go through it. So like my junior and senior year in high school my family didn’t really play much of a role.

Like Erica, Asia also attributed her independence and self-sufficiency to her personality by saying:

> I was pretty personally motivated. My parents didn’t really like get super involved in my college process because I was a good student and they didn’t need to be.

These comments offer a different perspective as Erica and Asia do not seem to miss the support from their families because they feel as though they can handle applying to college on their own. On the other hand, the other four participants suggest that more help from their parents would have been useful, so that they did not have to go through the process alone. Karmen added:
I just went through the whole process by myself and made my decision by myself. My mom listened to me talk but she really couldn’t give me much advice because she didn’t know herself.

The support often highlighted in the latter half of the interviews includes interesting accounts from students as they share how their mothers are still loving and supportive, but may not be able to understand everything they are going through as a minority college student. Dana made this clear when the interviewer asked how her family helped her transition and figure things out at school. She replied:

They didn’t really. I don’t think there was any way they could have helped. I think … my parents aren’t really… they are supportive but from a distance. I mean, what can they really do? I feel like more so I was independent than anything so I don’t feel like there could have been much.

This alternative type of support was also mentioned by Dasha as she was a first generation college student and felt that support from her family and mom was there but just not as much as she would have liked.

Just missing my family and not having them behind me at all times I think was hard but I eventually got past that was able to maneuver my way through on my own but still having her there but not just right there.

Finally, it was interesting to note that one specific area in which family support was not mentioned as being helpful was in the context of the classroom. Though crucial in their motivations to pursue college, the family support that students spoke so highly of seemed to stop short of the classroom stressors (i.e., feelings of loneliness and isolation) that many of the
students noted having to navigate. Kiya, who heavily emphasized how supportive and loving her mom is also discussed how lonely she felt while in school:

   I definitely felt like I was by myself. I’m one out of three black people in the whole class.

   So basically I was panicking the whole time.

It seems as though parental support, and more specifically maternal support is important for all of these students but may not extend to all aspects of students’ college experience.

   Support From Others. Aside from maternal support, students noted how they felt the need to ask for help outside of their families in order to ensure their success in college. The majority of the first generation college students noted that since their parent had not attended college they were unable to give advice in terms of college applications and financial aid assistance. This led to Dasha having to seek support outside of her family during her senior year as she explained:

   As a first generation college student I had no idea what was going on so I had to seek the help of my guidance counselor. My mom and stepdad were there but they didn’t necessarily know too much about college so I was really dependent upon other people.

Dana also spoke about instrumental guidance counselors and teachers in addition to numerous mentors she had while both preparing for and entering college.

   My family didn’t really play much of a role, it was more so the Project Uplift staff members … they are actually like one of the reasons why I came here.

Even in the classroom, students felt like they had to seek extra resources in order to feel supported. Karmen felt like the professors “didn’t really care or understand” what she was going through was when needed to go home for her cousin’s funeral and to be with family after they
were shot. Fortunately, since then Karmen found other individuals to help support her in her department:

> In the School of Education, I’ve gotten closer to our program coordinator so she was like whatever you need I’m here, we’re here and she was like if you need to go home for a few days you can go home so like that helped a lot.

**Coping With Stress**

Although the intended focus of the study was on family support in students from nontraditional families, many of the students were eager to have the opportunity to discuss some of the challenges they were experiencing. In this next section, I discuss some of the experiences students described that were relevant to their families as well as how they talked about feelings about their race and gender and coping with stress on campus.

While discussing visiting family and maintaining good grades, all six students touched on the subject of balance and how difficult it has been since their transition into college. The interviews illustrate that a large portion of emotional support for these six young women comes from their families as they are still navigating and making sense of their college environments.

In addition to family dinners and events, four out of the six students discussed how they had a relative back home who was sick or needed extra attention that they were not able to give them because of school. Erica’s mother had “some health issues” that really affected her and resulted in her not doing so well in her classes. Both Kiya and Dana had grandparents with fatal health conditions that truly impacted their college experience. Dana made clear:

> In the summer I found out that my grandmother is dying due to some lung thing. That can definitely impact me having to go see my grandmother more often, I definitely don’t get
as many weekends to focus on school work but at the end of the day you have to do what you have to do.

Kiya also noted that it was difficult to not focus on being left out of family affairs when her grandmother was sick during her sophomore year.

My grandmother was very sick. There were certain times in that semester that we didn’t think that she was going to make it, so I would have to drop everything and go home, like I definitely feel like my grades suffered from that. I would have A’s and B’s and it might be B’s and D’s the next time I looked at it.

The feelings of loneliness that students have mentioned in the classroom or in other spaces on campus affect them both emotionally and academically. There were interesting responses when asked about ways in which they cope with stress or make sense of their racial identity in these White spaces. Erica told a story from a history class in which a student referred to black people as “negroes”. Her response was:

Sometimes it’s frustrating and you just have to let it go. Other times you really want to correct someone and then you just let it go because at the end of the day you can’t regulate how everyone thinks. So I just kind of don’t really deal with those frustrations. I don’t know if it’s very healthy, but I just don’t.

All of the students in this study were either junior or seniors meaning that they have completed at least five full semesters of college. Shockingly, five of the six students reported that they still did not know how to cope with the stress of college as a minority student. Erica is a senior who admits that she still does not know how to handle stress:

Sometimes it’s not so healthy because I’ll just sleep for hours and take naps, then wake up and still be stressed out. But you know, sleeping kind of offers a temporary solution to
your problems, but at the same time I think it’s still an ongoing battle of trying to figure out how to deal with stress.

Karmen shared similar feelings about being a senior and still not quite grasping the concept of positively coping with stress. Dana also claims that she “still doesn’t know how to handle it”. Both her and Asia admit to the fact that they handle stress in the “wrong” way but do not really know what to do about it. Dasha also said:

More times than not school is a building up type of stress not necessarily me coping with it but more me like trying to avoid it for the time being and then at some point or another it just kind of erupts and I will lose it.

These feelings regarding frustrations and high stress levels are present in all of the students’ interviews. One would assume that all six students who spoke in such positive spirits about their mothers’ dedication to their education and aspirations would feel supported in all aspects of their school experience. However, five out of six of the students in the family feel as though they are alone in their academic college setting and are unsure of how to navigate this space as a minority student.

Discussion

This study intended to investigate the role of nontraditional family support for African American students attending a predominately White institution. Through use of a qualitative thematic analysis, participants revealed an overall moderate feeling of support from their families while in college. Consistent with Brofenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1977), students discussed race, gender, socioeconomic status, and parents’ education level as a means to give their experience context and make sense of their college journey. Thus, in addition to family
support, there appear to be several factors that interact to inform the college experiences of these young African American women.

With respect to the influence of family on the experiences of these students, it is clear that these young women rely heavily on their families for support and wisdom about navigating college, especially from their mothers. In the interviews, students mentioned that frequent calls to their mothers and a sense of community amongst relatives and extended kin keeps them grounded and motivated. Moreover, many of the participants also spoke to the importance of family support as a motivating factor to pursue a college degree. Students touched on how their parents and other family members made college a mandatory step following high school. Thus, the expectation of college attendance from family members may help to establish ideas about the function and utility of pursuing higher education. According to the literature, these type of expectancy messages are common, especially for African American students as many individuals hold on to the idea that upward mobility is based on one’s individual choices (Carter, 2008). In line with the social capital framework (Stanton-Salazar, 1997), these expectations may serve to empower students through obtaining knowledge through education that may broaden their horizon. Taken together, family messages and support may play a significant role in shaping the way in which these young women think about the necessity and value of college.

Despite the importance of familial support, many of the participants indicated navigating the college application process and the actual college experience, without much guidance or direction from their families. Students reported seeking out guidance from members outside of the home as a way to supplement the support that they received from home. This was particularly relevant for many of the first generation college students, as they mentioned both guidance counselors and teachers who they heavily relied on to assist them in completing their college
applications. As a result, participants often spoke to the dilemma of being “pulled between two worlds”. Research refers to this dual process as one of cultural and psychological change that occurs most often for African American students attending a PWI (Cole & Arriola, 2007).

Relatedly, findings from the study suggested that family support may function independently from that of the support they need once in college. That is, even though participants reported a lot of family support, many of the students shared that they did not feel as though they were receiving adequate amounts of social and emotional support while at college. This contrast was perhaps the most salient theme that emerged from the interviews, as we found that these young women have encountered a number of stressors throughout their precollege and college experiences that have led them to feel a lack of support from their families at one time or another. For example, participants voiced race-related stress as a prominent stressor, in addition to feelings of isolation, and also reported little support from their classroom professors. These findings echo many of the results commonly found in quantitative literature (Chavous, Harris, Rivas, Helaire & Green, 2004; Harper, 2013; Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2011) and shed further light on the experiences of African American students at a PWI.

Limitations, Challenges, and Future Directions

It is important to acknowledge limitations of this study. First, the generalizability of our findings may be limited to a very specific demographic given the homogeneity in participants. However, this also may reflect a strength of the study, as it may provide insight into the experiences of African American young women attending a PWI. Second, many of the students were more advanced in their time at the university. Yet, literature suggests that the experiences of more matriculated students may be different than the experiences of students just beginning their academic journey (Allen, 1992). Thus, future work should continue to explore the
experiences of African American students throughout their college tenure. Third, while my intended focus was to understand differences in the role of nontraditional family support and what that looked like, it was unclear what support themes were specific to hailing from nontraditional families and what was shaped by other contextual factors such as first generation status. It may be, for example, that the absence of support was a function of parents and families not having prior experiences with college and not a function of nontraditional family structure. Finally, although my intention was to understand the role of family support in African American students from nontraditional families, students were eager to discuss the stressors they were experiencing, which shifted the focus of the study some. Qualitative research allows some flexibility in this regard though with follow-up prompts, I might be able to gently redirect participants to glean more about the nature of familial support in nontraditional families in future studies.

**Conclusion**

Findings from this study highlight the unique experiences of African American young women attending a PWI, and the extent to which they feel supported by their families. Despite recognizing the support offered from their families, many of the students reported a desire for support from other sources that may more directly assist their academic journey. Thus, this study may set the stage for future research to identify how to support African American young women from nontraditional families, who are in critical need of the support order to assist them in navigating their college environments.
References


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http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_306.60.asp

Appendix

Interview Guide

• How would you describe the conversations, if any that you and your family had about higher education when you were younger?
• What thoughts did you have about college as a teenager?
• So walk me through what is was like for you to prepare for college.
• What adults around you were involved in any part of this process?
• What is your opinion on how your family influenced your application process for college?
• What was the transition like for your family when you left home for college?
• How did you handle the transition of leaving home for college?
• What experiences on campus have helped you to adapt to Carolina’s environment?
• How would you describe how you feel on Carolina’s campus as a minority student?
• Since your first year, how have you coped with stress while at school?
  o What role has your family played in this process?
  o Parents specifically?
• What does support look like from your family?
• If you recall, could you tell me how you learned to handle the stress of college?
• Tell me how you go about coping, what do you do?
• As you look back on your last three years, are there any times where you can remember school issues affecting your family relationships or vice versa?
• Could I ask you to describe the most important lessons you learned about your family while in college?
• What positive changes have occurred in your family since you have been at Carolina?
• What negative changes, if any, have occurred in your family or life since you have been at Carolina?
• Who has been the most helpful to you during this time? How has he/she been helpful?