Black, Educated, and Bougie: An Integrated Mixed-Method Analysis of Success Ideologies, Cultural Trends, Education Priorities, and Social Justice Values of Atlanta's Core Black Middle Class

ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, BLACK, EDUCATED, AND BOUGIE: AN INTEGRATED MIXED-METHOD ANALYSIS OF SUCCESS IDEOLOGIES, CULTURAL TRENDS, EDUCATION PRIORITIES, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE VALUES OF ATLANTA'S CORE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS, by KINYATTA TRICE, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

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AN INTEGRATED MIXED-METHOD ANALYSIS OF SUCCESS IDEOLOGIES, CULTURAL TRENDS, EDUCATION PRIORITIES, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE VALUES OF ATLANTA'S CORE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

by

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Under the direction of Dr. Joyce King

ABSTRACT

The Black middle class presents sociologists with unique opportunities to understand social mobility. Critical race theory (CRT) is an essential tool in Black class studies because it helps to identify ways that meritocratic discourses mask inequity and oversimplify the process of social mobility. Changes in the sociopolitical and racial landscape between the 1960s Civil Rights movement and the death of George Floyd in 2020 necessitate innovative studies of success and social equity ideologies in the Black population. This study is an integrated mixed-methodological analysis of core Black middle-class people living in Atlanta, Georgia. The research questions are: 1) What are the success narratives of Atlanta's core Black middle class, that is, how do members account for 'success,' however it is defined?; 2) What are the values and motivations that shape how this class conceives or understands success and how do these

relate to various cultural practices? ; 3) If distinct success ideologies can be delineated, how does each relate to equity and social justice concerns?; and 4) What role, if any, has education played in the success narratives and values of this class? Data were collected from sixteen participants via concept mapping and semi-structured phenomenological interviews. During concept mapping, participants brainstormed ideas, organized those ideas conceptually, and indicated values related to success, education, and social justice. Five people from the concept-mapping group were recruited to provide 90-minute phenomenological interviews to contextualize concept map findings. Data from concept mapping was analyzed using multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis; two coding phases were conducted to analyze interviews. This inquiry is significant because it centered Black experiential knowledge to construct a conceptual framework of success and social equity values of an understudied demographic. The study can inform education policymakers and social justice reformers about education, social equity, and success priorities from a seemingly privileged population; complicating meritocratic notions. In addition, it illustrates the utility of an integrated mixed-method research design in conducting sociological studies. Finally, the study is an example of honoring scholar and familial ancestors to continue the work of racial uplift.

INDEX WORDS: achievement, Atlanta, Black Mecca, Black middle class, class, concept mapping, critical race theory, cultural reflexivity, education, social justice, equity, social mobility, upward mobility, merit, meritocracy, mixed-methods, qualitative research, quantitative research

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DEDICATION

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To my fathers George Lambert Wright Jr., Henry Louis Trice Jr, and my grandmother Ollie Mae Hartage. This dissertation is an ebo for you all.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 1957, E. Franklin Frazier wrote *Black Bourgeoisie.* This sociological exposé was one of the first to use the phrase "the Black middle class[1]." Franklin's work discussed a new class of Black professionals and entrepreneurs who had begun to live a distinctly different social and economic experience in comparison to the Black masses. *Black Bourgeoisie* presents Frazier's most popularized analysis of the Black middle class. Since its publication, it has received considerable praise and critique and has persisted as one of the most popular foundational understandings of Black middle-class culture, ideology, and values. The popularity of this text has resulted in many readers of Frazier failing to consider his ideas about the Black middle class written prior to *The Black Bourgeoisie*. As early as 1924, Frazier discussed his excitement and concern about the emergent Black middle class. Analyzing Frazier's ideas presented in *Black Bourgeoisie* without reading his prior works results in an oversimplification and distortion of his stance about the Black middle class (Landry, 1978, p. 212). One of the most important aspects of his Black middle-class ideologies that is often overshadowed by his ideas in his later writings is that he was excited about the emergence of the class but was concerned that the economic stability of this group was precariously contingent upon national economic forces. Therefore, the emergent Black middle class must be extremely strategic and intentional when taking advantage of advancement opportunities (Frazier, 1924).

Frazier's concern about the well-being of the emergent Black middle class led him to dedicate many of his writings to describing the benefits of having a middle class and also admonishing where he believed the class was misstepping. In 1925 Frazier wrote his first book

[1] Authors note: The spelling "middle class" is used when the word is being used as a noun; when it is being used as an adjective it is spelled "middle-class." Additionally, the same grammatical rules are used for upper, working, and lower class.

solely dedicated to understanding the Black middle class: *Durham: Capital of the Black Middle Class.* In this research, he explained that the presence of the Black middle class raised the overall social status of the Black race. He explained:

> It is not the place where men write and dream; but a place where [B]lack men calculate and work. No longer can men say that the Negro is lazy and shiftless and a consumer. He has gone to work. He is a producer. He is respectable. He has a middle class. (Frazier, 1925, p. 333)

The ideas he expressed in this excerpt allude to the Black artistic movement of the Harlem Renaissance to contrast it and the economic developments occurring in Durham. The advancements of Blacks in Durham, according to Frazier, were a signal to larger society that Black people were productive members of society worthy of respect. The year prior (1924), in "Some Aspects of Negro Business," he states that the Black middle class serves as a social bridge between professional and working-class Blacks. Instead of pockets of affluence to impress White society, the Black middle class would raise the overall economic status of the Black race. This would occur because the middle class would:

- Liberate Blacks from degrading personal service
- Grow self-respect
- Increase Black capacity to demand respect from White counterparts because they possessed economic power and independence
- Provide adequate support for the higher levels of the culture (lawyers, doctors, teachers, artists, well-fare workers, churches) because these services would no longer be solely dependent upon White funds

With these understandings in mind, his critiques are more comprehensively contextualized. In

almost all instances, he admonished the emergent Black middle class because he believed they were failing to realize the potential he believed this group of the Black population possessed.

Situating Frazier's contentions with the middle class within his larger set of values and concern for the uplift of the Black race helps with appreciating the seemingly unforgiving harshness of his Black middle-class commentary in the *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957). Bart Landry, Frazier and Black middle-class scholar, contends that it is also helpful to categorize Frazier's critiques into three categories to understand why Frazier arrived at certain conclusions about the Black middle class (Landry, 1978). Landry's categorical analysis is insightful because it illuminates the values and sociopolitical concerns that undergird Frazier's middle-class ideologies. His first area of concern and critique dealt with the societal economic changes that birthed the new Black middle class or the "brown" middle class (Frazier, 1966). The sociopolitical changes and economic upheaval ushered in after the two World Wars resulted in more occupational differentiation within the Black population. Whereas the prestige of the old Black middle class was mostly predicated on familial background, the new Black middle class aligned more with the Western class system, which defined class by occupational status, income, and education.

In the *Negro Family in the United States* (1966), Frazier's thoughts show some ambivalence about the "brown" middle class. The old Black middle class gained status from family background and skin color. The new Black middle class primarily gained class status because of occupational differentiation (Frazier, 1957; Landry, 1978). In addition, the new Black middle class resulted from marriages between members of the old middle class (lighter skin) and the new middle class (darker skin); hence the "brown" label Frazier ascribed (Frazier, 1966). Frazier believed that societal changes that afforded the opportunity for higher incomes and better

quality jobs could erode values. In particular, he voiced concern with "conspicuous consumption," which he identified as a key characteristic of the American notion of the middle class. Despite this concern, Frazier expressed that the new Black middle class had the potential to occupy the same social and class reality as middle-class people of the Western world (Frazier, 1957, p. 291). This kind of social leveling was viewed as a positive social outcome if Black cultural traditions were retained. His concern also informed his ambivalence about the overall well-being of the class. The national changes that enabled the development of the class also positioned this group to be "the most preyed upon of the economically dependent classes" (Frazier, 1924, p. 297). Although Black people were taking advantage of opportunities for advancement, the opportunities were not of their own making; the class possessed no control over their own destiny (Landry, 1957, p. 212). Becoming distracted with materialistic pursuits was the wrong focus; instead, focus must be given to true economic independence.

Frazier's second cause of concern was the social origins of the emerging Black middle class. Although closely related to his first area of critique, this concern moved beyond concerns of conspicuous consumption and outlined the dangers of abandoning deeply rooted Black cultural traditions and adopting White cultural practices. Frazier believed that the new middle class was in danger of this because their social birthplace lacked stability:

> In terms of social origin, the new middle class had its roots partly in the old middle class and partly in the "lower and darker strata of the Negro population," that is from farmers, laborers, barbers and cooks… the "cultural heritage [of the old middle class], though modified…contributed to the stability and character of the emerging Negro middle class. (Frazier, 1957, p. 313)

As his analysis continues, he states:

> In view of the diverse cultural backgrounds from which the middle class springs, it is inevitable that there would be considerable confusion of ideals and patterns of behavior. The [new] middle class… has sloughed off in many cases the traditions of the mulatto families as well as the folk culture of the masses (Frazier, 1966, pp. 321-322).

Frazier believed the cultural and behavioral confusion of the new Black middle class would result in the class becoming enchanted with the "social rituals [of society] with its lavish entertainment" (Landry, 1978, p. 219). Most importantly, Frazier feared the lack of solid cultural practices and preoccupation with frivolity would result in anti-intellectualism, where Blacks were deluded regarding their sociopolitical reality (Landry, 1978).

The third area of Frazier's critique was the social and political position of the new Black middle class. Racism and segregation isolated Black people from the rest of society. According to Frazier, the isolation caused by racism and segregation precluded the middle class from serving what he believed to be their ultimate purpose—the racial uplift of the Black masses. Isolation resulted in a "quasi-pathological existence" (Frazier, 1957,1968), where Black people carried the oppressive need to be "recognized [and] accepted" (Landry, 1978, p. 219). Frazier contended that Black business people benefited from segregation because they existed at the top of a social hierarchy within the social confines of segregation. Misaligned privilege caused Black middle-class people to abandon political opportunities for racial uplift in the interest of social and cultural behaviors that protected their class status.

Though scathing at times, Frazier's critique mainly stemmed from his desire to see the Black middle class leverage their resources and privilege to improve the Black social, economic, and political condition. Instead of becoming enchanted by the frivolities of society, he hoped that the new Black middle class would leverage their privileges to challenge social oppression. By

the time of the publication of *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), he had grown severely concerned over the state of Black middle-class values. Other Black scholars and sociologists of the 20th century voiced similar concerns.

Carter G. Woodson expressed grave concerns about Black people who had been privileged enough to receive higher education. Twenty-four years prior to the publication of *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), Carter G. Woodson wrote *The Mis-education of the Negro* (1933). In this book, he painstakingly detailed the shortcomings of the higher education Black people were receiving. He argues that Black people's formal education resulted in them being disappointing and useless in the struggle for equality and racial elevation. Woodson believed that Blacks were not developing the kind of intellectualism that enabled them to be empowered agents of social and political change. Instead, Black folk who had received formal education were being socialized into a state of self-hate, community disregard, and overall cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance resulted from being schooled in ways that did not affirm their ways of knowing, cultural norms, and identities as valuable to society. In contrast, institutions of higher education taught philosophy, culture, and values undergirded by hegemonic discourses:

> …follow[ing] the traditional curricula of the times which did not take the Negro into consideration except to condemn or pity him…In geography the races were described in conformity with the program of the usual propaganda to engender in [W]hites a race of hate of the Negro…[In science] students were not told that ancient Africans of the interior knew sufficient science to concoct poisons…in the study of language in school the pupils were made to scoff at the Negro dialect as some peculiar possessions which they should despise…Negro law students were told that they belonged to the most criminal element in the country…In medical schools [they] were reminded [of the]

prevalence of syphilis and tuberculosis among Negroes. (Woodson, 1933, pp. 17-20) According to Woodson, institutions of higher education also socialized White and Black students to accept stereotypes about Black people as fact and to protect status quo White superiority.

Racial uplift was the most important concern for Woodson and many Black scholars of the 20th of century. To achieve racial uplift, higher education had to be more than a process of imparting information and hegemonic messages. Instead, it must foster critical intellectualism that informs people of their social condition, aid with identifying the origins of societal oppression, and enable the ability to cultivate tools to alleviate oppression. A person properly educated would be inspired and prepared to elevate their community. Socializing and educating people to perpetuate the status quo was detrimental to the whole of society; however, Woodson argued that it "worked more disastrously among Negros" (Woodson, 1933, p. 56). While legally free persons, Black people were barred from resources and opportunities that would result in full social and economic participation. Woodson argued that the collective actions of the Black race would be necessary to counter the sociopolitical systems that continued to systemically marginalize them. Like other thought leaders of his time, Woodson believed that assimilating into White culture and adopting their values was a wasted effort because it would not result in tangible changes in equity and access (Du Bois, 1903; Moton, 1925; Frazier, 1924, 1957). Imitation of whiteness distracted Black people from working on lasting systemic changes that would result in an overall improvement in the quality of life of the Black population.

Frazier's and Woodson's critiques of the middle class and the highly educated were rooted in concern for the betterment of the Black population. Both scholars believed that education was essential in the struggle for equality. Black folk, however, would not prosper if they received the same kind of education that enabled their White counterparts to prosper. The

social and political realities received Blacks and Whites differently. As such, Blacks' and Whites' education, values, and culture could not be the same. Woodson and Frazier also strongly expressed that those in more privileged positions—highly educated and middle class—must leverage those privileges to help the Black masses.

Class and the Black Community

The interplay between education, class behavior, and values persists as a popular point of scholarly inquiry and critique. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, scholars have sought to understand Black class dynamics. Studies such as Pattillo-McCoy's *Black Pickett Fences* (2000, 2013), Landry and Marsh's "Evolution of the Black Middle Class" (2011), or Cole and Omari's "Race, Class, and the Dilemmas of Upward Mobility for African Americans" (2003) empirically compare and contrast the White and Black middle class. Studies comparing and contrasting the Black and White middle class highlight how Black middle-class culture, economics, and values exist within the confines of hegemonic oppression. In addition, such studies also emphasize that the Black middle class is not socially or economically synonymous with their White counterparts. Another approach to Black middle-class studies is to analyze intra-group class dynamics within the Black community. Karyn Lacy's *Blue Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle* Class (2007); Marsh and colleague's "The Emerging Black Middle Class: Single and Living Alone" (2007), and Cassi Claytor's *Black Privilege: Modern Middle-Class Blacks with Credentials and Cash to Spend* (2020) are studies that examine the class values and experiences of middle-class Blacks to further understand the demographic from within. No matter the research angle, scholars who study the Black middle class agree that Black and White middle-class experiences are not synonymous. The sociohistorical contexts of each group make it impossible to argue otherwise. However, within the restrictions of compound

oppression, a Black middle class has established an existence distinct from the Black masses' experience.

Historians and sociologists have been able to chronicle Black middle-class development (Du Bois, 1903; Frazier, 1925, 1957; Johnson, 1925; Moton, 1925; Willis, 2018; Wilson, 1978), identify diversity within the demographic, and identify distinct cultural norms (Claytor, 2020; Frazier, 1957; Graham, 1999; Herskovits, 1941; Lacy, 2007; Pattillo, 1999, 2007). The history of Black people in America is vast, rich, and ever-expanding. It is most certainly too vast to capture in any single research project. Researchers of the Black experience utilize a number of ways to categorize Black history in order to make it palatable for intellectual inquiry and analysis. One approach is observing and analyzing trends that emerge in the Black experience throughout history. E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), Julius Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978), Marsh and colleague's "The Emerging Black Middle Class: Single and Living Alone" (2007), and Bart Landry's *The New Black Middle Class* (2018) are some of the many studies that utilize historical analysis to understand influential moments in African American history.

The formation of a stable Black middle class began after the passing of multiple civil rights legislations of the 60s and 70s. However, the sociohistorical underpinnings of the Black middle class began with separating enslaved Africans into *house* or *field* slaves. Those deemed as *house* slaves were typically lighter in skin color, had more access to White culture, more chances of receiving some semblance of education, and were more likely to have forced or clandestine sexual relations with enslavers resulting in offspring. While mulatto offspring were given no more rights than their parents or *field* laborers, their presence contributed to the pseudo-class division between dark and light-skinned slaves (Graham, 1999). Though sporadic and not

equally accessible, a small percentage of enslaved Blacks could be deemed free persons either through their state abolishing slavery (e.g., Pennsylvania in 1780 Act) or by converting to Christianity and successfully completing indentured servitude. This group of Black people largely formed the original elite class of Black people. Although the vestiges of the Black middle class can be traced to the 1870s, most African Americans did not have access to formal education, an opportunity to acquire professional skills, or the chance to become a political figure that would result in the social/class status to be a part of the Black elite until the 60s and 70s (Graham, 1999; Lacy, 2007; Wilson, 1978).

Social and political shifts cause the "identity of the [B]lack middle class (the who) [to change] as and when the general position of African Americans change[d]" (Pattillo, 1999, p. 15). For Black people, social mobility experiences occur in cycles: "periods of immense disadvantage…shifts to periods of progress and hopefulness followed by stagnation and retrenchment" (Pattillo, 1999, 2007; Thomas, 2015). These cycles occur because of systemic and structural oppression embedded in societal operations that disenfranchise folk based on factors such as race, gender, class, age, and sexuality. While such oppression is ever present, the cycles of progress result from African Americans resisting and fighting against the inhumane conditions created out of these oppressive experiences. Frazier's preoccupation with the Black middle class is grounded in this reality. The precarity of the Black middle class necessitated an awareness and activism to contend with the endemic cyclical nature of Black-specific oppression (Frazier, 1924).

In the United States, one of the pervasive sociopolitical discourses is that people experience social and economic mobility based on ability and merit (Adams, 2018; Jin & Ball, 2020; Lui, 2011). While meritocratic values undergird many political and legal approaches in

American society, critical researchers (Bell, 1993; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado, 1995; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2015) contend that social mobility is not equally available to every person in society. These scholars have produced theories to critique meritocracy. Theories such as critical race theory, racial formation theory, or Black feminism illustrate that sociopolitical and historical factors mitigate access to resources and opportunity. Analyzing the experiences of African Americans through critical lenses reveals that systemic marginalization and disenfranchisement of legal, economic, educational, and social opportunities stifle social and economic mobility in Black and other communities of color. While other ethnic groups were able to enter the labor market in the United States voluntarily, "[B]lacks suffered through paternalistic domination and exploitive systems of sharecropping until the early twentieth century" (Thomas, 2015, p. 193). The Black middle class has a much shorter history and is considerably less stable than middle-class counterparts of other demographics because of this history (Jackson & Williams, 2003). African Americans who are able to experience social mobility may also face in-group discrimination because of their upward mobility. Although contested, it has been argued that upwardly mobile Blacks begin a process of disidentification and political distancing from the Black masses when they experience mobility. Middle-class Blacks must also contend with discrimination from the new social and class spaces they enter (Jackson & Stewart, 2003; Thomas, 2015). The existence of a Black middle class within these contexts presents researchers with an ideal opportunity to analyze the interplay between American social processes and class culture. The Black middle class also provides urban and education sociologists with opportunities to expand research and understanding that will benefit social and political reform efforts.

Within urban sociology, new research on the Black middle class can continue studying

understudied nuances within Black social and economic classes. For example, Karen Lacy's study *Blue Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class* (2007) identified three distinct parts of the Black middle class—lower, core, and upper. Lacy explained that individuals earning less than $50,000 are lower middle class; individuals earning more than $50,000 but less than $100,000 are core Black middle class; and people who earn more than $100,000 are elite Black middle class (Lacy, 2007, p. 41). She was also able to show that middle-class Black people in her study developed practices and cultural values that enabled them to maintain ties with other Blacks (Lacy, 2007; Thomas, 2015). These findings are important because prior research on the Black middle class conflated the experiences of all Black middle-class folks, camouflaging the distinctive core and upper-middle-class culture and experiences with the class and cultural experiences of the working or poor class. Lacy's study also counters past studies that contend that upwardly mobile Blacks distance themselves and fail to identify with Black counterparts in other social and economic classes. Analyzing the realities and culture of the core and upper middle class provides new tools and understanding of how Black social mobility and a distinctly Black culture survive through discrimination and unfair treatment (Thomas, 2015).

Education policymakers and reformists also stand to benefit from continued research on the Black middle class. A small percentage of the Black middle class attained class status because of intergenerational wealth. However, the vast majority of Black middle-class folk attained class status because of educational preparation (Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Harris, 2020; Thomas, 2015; Claytor, 2020). Because education is a vital component of social mobility in the Black community, understanding Black middle-class values, ideologies, and culture offers an opportunity to further document and analyze how educational attainment is fettered by systemic

racism. Despite being in a more socially and economically privileged position than lower and working-class counterparts, middle-class Black families still must contend with "residential segregation determined [by] school district lines; inadequate educational policies determin[ing] the amount of resources going to particular schools, poor educational standards limit[ing] students' educational preparedness, and teachers' stereotyp[ing]… negatively influencing students' motivation" (Thomas, 2015, p. 196). The education experiences, the hypocritical nature of meritocracy, and the expanding Black middle class emphasize the need to continually focus on this group to understand success narratives, motivations, culture, and social and political concerns.

Atlanta & the Black Middle Class

Atlanta has a long history of attracting upwardly mobile Black people. The reasons for this include the city's complex social and political agendas that critical historians and sociological researchers argue promotes neoliberal agendas that attract Black professionals that align with the city's brand and image (Hobson, 2018, 2017; McCartin, 2005; Pierannuzi & Hutcheson, 1990). Atlanta hosts the world's largest conglomerate of African American private institutions of higher education—the A.U.C. (Atlanta University Center Consortium, 2018). Both W.E.B Du Bois and E. Franklin chaired sociology departments within the A.U.C. Frazier was appointed a sociology professor in 1923 at Morehouse College. During his time at Morehouse, he established the Atlanta School of Social Work (American Sociological Association, n.d.) Du Bois was invited in 1934 by president John Hope to chair the Sociology Department of Atlanta University. Du Bois remained at Atlanta University until 1934, with his time in Atlanta being considered some of his most influential scholarship and activism (Aldridge, 2020). Atlanta University merged with another historically Black college, Clark College, and became Clark-

Atlanta University in 1988. In addition to being an epicenter for Black education, Atlanta is also a hotbed of Black cultural aesthetics and entertainment. The Atlanta Bureau of Cultural Affairs was established in 1974 to make art more accessible to Atlanta's citizens, with a large portion of the citizenry focusing on Black art and culture. A Black mayor has led the city since 1974. These characteristics, along with hosting a majority Black citizenry, have worked to create the Black Mecca image of the city (Hobson, 2018; Stokes, 2018; Sasso, Matthews & Newkirk, 2019). The characteristics of the city make for an ideal location to examine the politics of race, class, and achievement.

A Brief Discussion of "Bougie"

Conversations about what constitutes success within the African American population are varied. The extant academic literature presents an array of definitions and descriptions of the Black middle class. Although the specifics vary, the typical social and economic characteristics associated with the Black middle class include income or occupational status, educational attainment, neighborhood location, and resource-rich social networks. While the phrase "Black middle class" is commonly used to refer to this demographic, academic, social, and pop culture literature also uses another term. In *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957)*,* Frazier used the term "bourgeoisie" to refer to economically and socially upwardly mobile Blacks. When Frazier originally used this term in his 1925 writing, *Durham: Capital of the Black Middle Class,* the ideas he expressed about this group within the Black community aligned with Marxist definitions of the bourgeoisie—"a group of industrialists engaged in profit taking from industrial or productive enterprises" (Landry, 1978, p. 214). By the writing of *Black Bourgeoisie* (1933), Frazier's understanding of who and what the Black middle class was had transformed to encompass the cultural and economic traits he emphatically critiqued throughout the study. Since

then, many social and academic scholars have analyzed discourses that shape perceptions and definitions of the Black middle class. One of the discourses that have shifted is how the word bourgeoisie is utilized. The word in its original form is rarely used; instead, an abbreviated/colloquial rendition—"bougie"—is often used in Black popular cultural spaces and in scholarly sociological studies.

Mary Pattillo's *Black Picket Fences* (1999) stated that Black residents of the middle class of a south side Chicago neighborhood included in her study used words such as "ghetto bourgie"—the shortened version of bourgeois—and "uppity" to refer to middle-class Blacks. In this work, using the word *"*bourgie*"* expressed contempt because it was used to signify someone's dislike of middle-class displays of pretentiousness (Pattillo-McCoy, 2013). The ideas about the word "bourgie" shared in Pattillo-McCoy's study indicate that there are class cleavages within the Black middle class. *Black Pickett Fences* was a study of a middle-class neighborhood, which captured ideas about their cultural values and experiences. In spite of the class sharing a similar class status, the participants in her study used the word "bourgie" to identify displays of middle-class culture and behavior that were different from their own. The use of the word is also proof that middle-class culture within the Black population comprises people with a myriad of class values, social behaviors, lifestyle choices, and cultural practices.

In the anthology titled *From Bourgeois to Boojie: Black Middle-Class Performances* (Young, 2011), professors from universities across the United States contributed essays that analyzed and detailed the use and meaning of the term bourgeois and its many colloquial adaptations. The anthology's introduction explained how the terms bourgeois and boojie are used to label class performances that are associated with middle-class people. The word performance is used because the essays discussed actions and behavioral expressions. Frazier's ideas about the

characteristics of middle-class Black people were discussed to juxtapose them with the ideas about Black middle-class people discussed in the anthology. The editors stated that the collection of essays aimed to discuss the kind of middle-class people Frazier omitted from his discussions (Young, 2011, p. 11). While it is acknowledged that boojie or bourgeois can be wielded as pejorative terms, the editors explained that the words also have other communicative functions.

One use of the word boojie discussed by Young (2011) is to refer to Black people who live outside of their social or economic means in order to distance themselves from lower-class Blacks. An example is a single parent who lives in public housing but does not speak or interact with the other people in the community because they do not identify with the cultural expression or identities present in the community. A second-class performance the term boojie labels is Black people who have experienced class mobility and no longer identify with the cultural practices of their class of origin. People exhibiting this class performance of boojie signal the change in class identity by distancing themselves from people and cultural practices associated with their old class reality in exchange for personal gain. This act of boojie equates proper middle-class performance with White middle-class culture. A third kind of boojie is people who come from a common folk background but have elevated their class status, incorporated some middle-class cultural values and behaviors from the White middle class into their cultural practices, and also retain a "positive perspective on and relationship with the Black majority" (Young, 2011, p. 8). While the social, cultural, and identity inferences differ, the term always refers to middle-class behaviors or cultural expressions. The essays included in the anthology explored the divergent meanings of the term to illustrate that there are a variety of ways that boojie can be used and understood. It is important to be attentive to this fact and be observant of when and how it is used to understand what middle-class expressions are being labeled and

accurately understand the connotations being evoked.

Bougie—or one of the many variations of the word—is also common in popular culture vernacular. A Google search of the term “bougie” yields over 1 million results that show a multitude of online magazines, songs, blogs, and academic articles that either use this specific version of the word or an alternate spelling. The term "bougie" is popular throughout American culture. However, cultural idiosyncrasies change how the term is used, understood, and received in conversation. Spellings of "bougie" can also vary by culture. In Black cultural language—African American Vernacular English (AVE)—the terms "bougie," "bourgie," "boujie,” “bougee,” “boojie,” and “boujee” are all common spellings. Informal variations of the word “bourgeois” are more common than the terms “bourgeoisie” or “bourgeois.” A 2017 article in *The Root,* an online magazine written to target African American readership founded by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Donald Graham, addresses the social rules that dictate when to use a particular version of the word “bourgeois.” In the article, “The Difference Between Bougie, Boujee, and Bourgie/Bourgeois Explained” (2017), each variation was defined, and examples were provided to explain when to use them.

According to the journalist who penned the article, Daniel Young, bourgie and bourgeois are typically considered to be pejorative expressions. This is especially so in the South. These terms have this connotation in the South because those who typically exhibited bourgeois behaviors were from family backgrounds and cultural traditions associated with Victorian values and whiteness. Bourgie and bourgeois are synonymous with uppity and pretentiousness. In contrast, the word bougie comes from urban origins: "bougie" Black people are mostly urban, have completed some form of secondary education, and, most importantly, possess and are mindful of certain urban/educated aesthetic" (Young, 2017). The greatest contrast between

bourgeois and bougie Blacks is that bougie Blacks have a relationship with the proverbial or literal "hood." While they may or may not have grown up there, they are certainly comfortable hanging out and relating to this social space.

Lastly, the term boujee refers to Black people who are newly rich or hood rich. Young explains that Black people in this cultural lifestyle have a middle-class or upper-middle-class position that they finance in ways that are not always legal. This group has little to no aspiration beyond financial accumulation (Young, 2017). Young's article also highlights another important fact about bougie—or one of its variations—it has become extremely popular in hip-hop music. While hip-hop songs do not always adhere to the definitions explained in Young's article, the word's popularity suggests that bougie is moving further away from a pejorative term and closer to a socially acceptable and likable identity characteristic.

In 2017, an Atlanta-based rap group, Migos, published a song titled "Bad and Boujee". Presented on a high-energy musical composition backdrop, the song lyrics state: "You know, young rich ni**as…we never really had no old money. We got a whole lotta new money though…pull up in Ghosts…Rick the Ruler, diamonds cooler. This a Rollie, not a Muller...I am young, rich, plus I'm bougie" (Migos, 2017). Through street colloquialism and pop culture slang that refers to luxury vehicles, jewelers who sell high-end custom pieces, and designers who cater to the rich and famous, the song lyrics boast about the social and economic mobility experienced in contrast to the socioeconomic class in which they were born. In another song titled "Bougie" (2019), Chicago artist Lil Dirk expresses similar sentiments. Some of the song lyrics are:

> …First thing on my mind when I wake up is a check. I ain't know the [girl] for long, she asked for Audemars Piguet. You want diamonds, you don't want no bag, you think you bougie…you don't want FashionNova, you want some Gucci…I think I'm bougie, Mike

> Amiri jeans cost me two G's. Ooh, I think I'm bougie. Came a long way from the trenches, riding CTA. From the chopper to the jet, it look like GTA. And they say I won't be [anything], ain't make my GPA. (Lil Dirk, 2019)

In this snippet, the song artist raps about how he and the women he associates with have an affinity for high-end fashion designers and jewelry. Similar to Migos, Lil Dirk also talks about how upward mobility has changed his class status. In the past, public transportation was his only form of transportation; however, he now commissions private air travel for transportation. Lil Dirk's song also alludes to having challenges with educational attainment as a student, which typically results in failing to experience social or economic mobility. Because of the changes in his social and class status, the hook of the song repeats that his mindset is now that of a bougie person.

These songs are just two of many songs in hip-hop culture that use the word bougie, or a variation of it, to describe their mindset, consumptive practices, and class behaviors. The class status of these rappers is certainly different from core Black middle-class people; however, the popularity of the term is apparent by how frequently songwriters use it to appeal to their fan bases. The theme of upward mobility in these songs, and in a significant portion of hip-hop music, also underscores the importance of this social phenomenon in the Black community.

The pop cultural pervasiveness of middle-class behavioral and cultural norms also appears in mainstream sitcom television. During the late 80s through the early 90s,"The Cosby Show*"* was one of the few shows on mainstream TV depicting a middle-class Black family experiencing their daily lives. However, this has changed over the past three decades. Present-day shows such as "My Wife and Kids" (2001-2005), "Girlfriends" (2000-2008)*,* "Black-ish" (2014- 2022), and "#blackAF" (2020) all display Black middle and upper-class realities as they

negotiate the duality of class and race. While these shows pick up the metaphorical baton where "The Cosby" show stopped, it has been argued that they discuss and engage with the intersection of race and class in ways that "The Cosby" show did not (Jenkins, 2022; Kahleeli, 2017; Seitz, 2014).

One of the primary premises of the show "Black-ish*"* is balancing the privileges of class without compromising Black cultural identity. Kenya Barris, the show's creator, states that 90% of the show's content is based on his life (Kahleeli, 2017). The family in the sitcom consists of married parents and five children who negotiate the implications of police brutality, racially charged presidential campaigns, workplace politics, and protecting cultural and racial identity expressions (Kahleeli, 2017). The proliferation and success of shows such as "Black-ish" are a testament that being middle class and Black is more common than in past eras. However, the topics of the episodes also emphasize that the Black middle-class experience involves unique sociopolitical truths. Both parents work through being high achieving and upwardly mobile and acknowledging and/or negotiating the barriers that can be constructed between Blacks of other classes despite a person individually valuing racial uplift and solidarity. For example, In the very first episode of the sitcom, the father of the family, Dre, is promoted to a high-level executive position within his company. Despite his excitement, the episode delves into the psychological angst he experiences as he ponders if he is paying some unforeseen price for living out his dream (e.g., expectations of cultural assimilation or loss of Black camaraderie) (Jenkins, 2022). The show ended in 2022 and was proceeded by a spin-off, "Grown-ish*,*" focusing on the life of one of the children. Other mainstream television shows that display Black middle and upper-class families showcase people working through similar challenges. These shows illustrate the normalcy of Black people existing within class spaces and embracing "bougie" practices. In

addition, they highlight the complexities of being Black and middle/upper class.

The various definitions and social and cultural understanding of the word bougie make it a complex and intriguing moniker for the Black middle class. Some feel that "bougie/bourgie" refers to a desirable class or lifestyle. Sometimes it is used to label middle-class behaviors or values. Bougie, or one of its variations, is also a label for acts of pretentiousness and social distancing behaviors that have been known to be exhibited by middle-class Black people. Still, others use it to refer to Black middle-class folk who wish to identify with a collective Black experience while also occupying a middle-class status. In spite of the different connotations, the word is consistently used to refer to behaviors, ideologies, or values of middle-class folk. The social definitions associated with this term capture the complexities of the Black middle class' existence. Despite achievement and class advancement, there are in-group challenges, cultural values that continue to shift, and ideologies that are still being developed as the Black middle class continues to expand. The Black middle class has a unique heuristic appeal because of the contexts in which it has had to forge an existence. At times, the class group can seem to be as trendy of a research phenomenon as the word "bougie." However, beyond the trend, the literature continues to show that it is a demographic of the American population that deserves greater analysis and understandings derived from perspectives articulated by members of the Black middle class.

The Problem

Meritocratic discourses are insidious. Although access to opportunity and resources is predicated on factors such as class, race, gender, and/or sexual orientation, this pervasive discourse communicates that people earn access to resources, opportunity, and social mobility strictly based on intelligence and effort. Meritocratic ideals eschew the reality that there are

privileges attached to family backgrounds, race groups, gender groups, sexual orientations, religious affiliations, or social networks that are valued versus those that are not. Within a presumed meritocratic society, such as the United States, unequal outcomes are explained to be the result of differences in individual capabilities. This explanation assumes that the most talented and intelligent people will rise to the best places in society while those less intelligent or talented do not. This is dangerous because "the deployment of [an] individualistic explanation of outcome differences makes social inequality more difficult to recognize and challenge" (Jin & Ball, 2020, p. 65). Gaps in education, wealth, and income between White and Black persons are operations of systemic oppression; however, meritocratic perspectives identify Black, and other marginalized populations, as the cause of their social and class pathologies. The systems that are the cause of inequity continue to exist, and the status quo is protected.

The voices of marginalized populations are essential in challenging inequality and accurately describing the realities that exist in a presumed meritocracy. While new class studies are beginning to challenge the limitations of past studies that analyzed Black middle-class politics, culture, behavior, and values, the prevailing understanding of the Black middle class is based on studies that have imposed mainstream definitions and values of success onto the research. Measures of success included achievements such as college education, professional jobs, and asset acquisition. The political, social, and racial landscape has shifted significantly since 20th-century understandings. Various racial projects (Omi & Winant, 2015) have also been formed and dismantled during the 21st century that warrants new approaches and understandings of Black middle-class experiences, the ways in which systemic oppression fetters opportunity, and how oppression is circumvented.

It is also important to capture the culture, values, motivations, and consumptive trends of

this influential demographic within the Black community. While it may be that a portion of this class aligns with White cultural values and lifestyle choices, newer research suggests that there are people in the class whose lifestyle choices affirm a distinctively Black cultural affiliation (Lacy, 2007; Claytor, 2019; Young, 2011). These sub-populations within the Black middle class all offer insight and perspective regarding the insidious nature of meritocratic values and ideologies that undergird and excuse systemic oppression. Missing the opportunity these insights offer also makes it more likely that solutions that aim to close the education and wealth gaps will continue to fail. Antiquated discourses of disidentification and disassociation will also continue to dominate sociological and historical understandings of the Black middle class. New approaches to understanding the experiences of the Black middle class are key to challenging the fallacies of meritocracy and accurately detailing the Black middle-class experience.

Research Questions

The research questions developed in response to this problem are:

1) What are the success narratives of Atlanta's core Black middle class, that is, how do members account for "success," however it is defined?
2) What are the values and motivations that shape how this class conceives or understands success and how do these relate to various cultural practices?
3) If distinct success ideologies can be delineated, how does each relate to equity and social justice concerns?
4) What role, if any, has education played in the success narratives and values of this class?

These research questions also made it possible to accomplish the study's goals and resulted in the significance of its findings.

Purpose

The first purpose of this study was to center core Black middle-class voices to define success and motivations of upward mobility, thereby adding to the extant literature with data from the epicenter of Black middle-class life in the South: Atlanta, Georgia. Instead of imposing American hegemonic conceptualizations and understandings of success onto African Americans, this research gleaned insight from the population being studied and highlighted where and how their success conceptualizations align or disconnect with hegemonic definitions and motivations of success.

Secondly, the purpose was to examine core Black middle-class cultural values and if and how their social equity concerns influence ideologies and behaviors. Research and theories found in books such as *Black Bourgeoisie* (Frazier, 1957), *The Declining Significance of Race* (Wilson, 1978), and *The Mis-education of the Negro* (Du Bois, 1933) have largely dominated the discourses that frame class and race studies. The findings and theories of these sociologists were varied; however, one of the most popularized ideas from these works is that White culture and values appeal to Black middle-class people. Studies such as *Black Pickett Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class* (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999), *Blue Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class (*Lacy, 2007), "The Emerging Black Middle Class: Single and Living Alone" *(*Marsh et al., 2007), *The New Black Middle Class* (Landry, 2018), *Black Privilege: Modern Middle-Class Blacks With Credentials and Cash to Spend (*Claytor, 2020), all present findings that challenge or question prior beliefs about Black middle-class people's desire to assimilate into White culture. However, changes in the social and political landscape of America necessitate continued study of the way that Black middle-class culture and identity values shift according to the sociopolitical context. In addition, geographic location influences

class dynamics. This study furthers understandings about the core Black middle class of Atlanta, Georgia, a demographic of middle-class Black people situated in a city rich with Black culture and civil rights history. Atlanta has historically attracted large populations of Black people seeking upward mobility (Hobson, 2017). Because of this history, it now hosts a sizeable and diverse Black middle-class population.

The third purpose of this study was to develop a conceptual framework of upward mobility and social equity and gather success narratives from a demographic of the Black middle class that has been defined by past research as the "core" Black middle class (Lacy, 2007) to interrogate the intersection of educational achievement values, upward mobility experiences, and class values. This research goal aided with revealing how core Black middle-class experiences align or diverge from dominant discourses of merit-based mobility. Designing the study to target this population responds to a research need to acknowledge and critically investigate Black middle-class diversity (Lacy, 2007; Landry, 2018; Marsh, 2007; Clatyor, 2020). Past studies of the Black middle class did not always highlight the differentiated experiences that exist within the Black middle class. For example, household incomes of $30k, $50k, and $100k are all incomes associated with Black middle-class populations. Research has shown that middle-class lifestyles, identity, and cultural practices vary greatly based on income level (Lacy, 2007). However, past studies would gather findings from a diverse middle-class sample and report findings in ways that masked the varied experiences that can result from different middle-class incomes. For example, Thomas Shapiro (2004) used an income range of $17,000 to $79,000 to define the middle class in his study *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality*. Another example is Mary Pattillo's *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class* (1999) study that established the middle class as twice the

$39,000 poverty level in Chicago. Pattillo provides a keen analysis of the manners in which working-class and middle-class Blacks shared similar fates with respect to systemic oppression. However, the unique class experiences of middle-class Black people with higher incomes and who are arguably more secure in their middle-class positionality are not highlighted. Targeting a clearly defined sample of the Black middle class prevents conflating the experiences of the core and upper Black middle class with their poor or working-class counterparts. Engaging in an investigation of middle-class nuances and diverse perspectives is imperative for research that aims to interrogate the nature of pervasive systemic oppression and how it might operate within populations with perceived privilege or who are high achieving.

The fourth purpose of this study was to juxtapose contemporary education, social equity, and class values to historically rooted Black historical class and education theorists to examine differences and alignment. Contemporary values are embedded in current sociopolitical realities but are also connected to historical events and understandings. Although new research has been produced, deeply embedded ideologies such as those of E. Franklin Frazier, Carter G. Woodson, and W.E.B Du Bois persist as useful theoretical perspectives in revealing understandings in contemporary social equity, class, and education studies. The nature of racialization and systemic oppression warrants that social science researchers continually interrogate where historical understandings remain relevant and where contemporary understandings must drive discourses. Intentionally engaging in a historical versus contemporary analysis of the study group's analytical themes produced critical understandings to expand extant literature about Black populations. In addition, this purpose aided in providing policymakers and social justice reformers with more relevant and accurate research to create aligned reform efforts and identify policy priorities.

Significance

Research produced from critical perspectives is essential in dismantling meritocratic discourses. Meritocratic discourses in America were born out of a society where Whites have knowingly and unknowingly been positioned to benefit politically, economically, and educationally (Horsford, 2011; Taylor, 2016). These discourses shroud the privileges of Whites and the marginalization of populations of color. In a presumed meritocracy, everyone is thought to have equal opportunity for upward mobility. Merit-based upward mobility presumably occurs through effort and intelligence. It is important to counter meritocratic values and discourses because "claims of merit and colorblindness have an insidious effect that has been difficult to counter with traditional forms of research, statistics, and legal procedures" (Taylor, 2016, p. 7). Identifying the upward mobility, social equity, and educational values of core Black middle-class people and analyzing that data using the tenets of CRT and theoretical frameworks from Black historical class and education theorists, highlights where this class' upward mobility stories and success ideologies align or differ from dominant ideologies and narratives.

The unique positionality of the core Black middle class was also leveraged as a source of epistemology throughout this study (Parker & Lynn, 2016, p. 146). The participants' experiences, truths, values, and ideologies provided data to concept map and collect interview narratives that were analyzed to identify themes to examine the extent to which and how oppressive processes operate in a seemingly privileged demographic. The success ideologies, education values, cultural beliefs, and social equity priorities were also visually depicted as a map of the conceptual framework. The themes of the study were analyzed via contemporary and historical understandings of the education and class values of the Black middle class to describe present-day nuances. The study’s significance is:

1) It centers the voices of the core Black middle class to expand extant success and achievement literature that seeks to further understandings of the Black middle class and corresponding ideologies by examining an understudied nuance of the Black middle class.
2) It investigated if and how social justice and equity sociopolitical issues influence social mobility goals, experiences, and Black middle-class cultural values. The findings complicate meritocratic discourses that protect systemic oppression by revealing how upward mobility operates in a seemingly privileged demographic and possess the potential to inform education policymakers and social justice reformers with more textured accounts of success and achievement.
3) It employed an integrated mixed-method design to interrogate how educational achievement and upward mobility values influence class values; highlighting the utility of these data methods for identifying priorities and values in populations often pushed to the margins.
4) It responds to the explicit and implied charge of historical scholar-ancestors and familial ancestors to continue the work of racial uplift in professional, social, political, and academic achievements and presents as a contemporary example of honoring ancestors by continuing the work of racial uplift and authentically recording Black histories.

Theoretical Framework

The United States is a presumed meritocracy. One of the dominating social discourses is that people have equal access to resources and opportunities for upward mobility. This pervasive societal narrative masks the fact that people with stagnant economic and social mobility are victims of systemic oppression. Instead of accurately naming oppressive systems, individuals are

encouraged to engage in competitiveness to acquire social resources. Individuals are made to believe that their merit will result in class mobility. British sociologist and politician, Michael Young, explained the formula for merit-based achievement as "merit= intelligence + effort" (Young, 1957). In studies of class, especially studies that work with marginalized populations, it is important to engage in an analysis that critically guides the researcher's explanation of data. Critical analysis accounts for the role of social processes such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in data results. A critical analysis aids in investigating and labeling the role of systemic factors and hegemonic discourses in data findings (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Jin & Ball, 2020). Without the proper theoretical lens, scholars are unable to dissect and reframe liberal discourses, such as merit-based mobility or class theories that argue that race is declining in significance (Wilson, 1978).

Critical race theory—or CRT as it is commonly called—was created in the 1970s. It is a theoretical framework born from the minds of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars throughout the United States, aiming to label and fight newer manifestations of racism born out of the civil rights era. The sociopolitical changes ushered in by the civil rights era resulted in legal and social policies no longer being overtly discriminatory; however, "unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources along political, economic, racial, and gendered lines…with support and legitimacy of the legal system persisted" (Taylor, 2016, p. 1). Critical race theory recognizes that there are relationships between knowledge construction, naming, and power. The tenets of the theory guide researchers to analyze social processes in a manner that labels oppressive entities so that activists can create effective solutions to dismantle systemic oppression. CRT intends "to not only understand our social condition, but to change it, setting out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies but to transform it for the better”

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 8). The theory is influenced by other critical theories from the disciplines of philosophy and gender studies, which makes it useful for analysis in a myriad of social inquiries. It is common to see four to six tenets that comprise the theory (Degaldo & Stefancic, 2017; Taylor, 2016).

The first tenet is that racism is normal (Delgado, 2017; Taylor, 2016). Racism is part of day-to-day societal experiences. It structures and organizes our world. Because racist ideologies and practices are so embedded into societal operations, they can be difficult to name. White superiority concepts and ideals have been ingrained as the norm. These ideals are taught in overt and subverted ways in education curricula, with reification happening via sociopolitical and legal processes. This tenet is important when investigating class in a marginalized population. In this study, it resulted in intentionally considering how the permanence of racism influenced participants' social mobility narratives, perspectives, meaning making, and values.

The second tenet is called interest convergence. This tenet purports, "Black interests of racial equality have been accommodated only when they have converged with the interests of powerful Whites" (Taylor, 2016, p. 5). The setting for this study was Atlanta, Georgia. It is a city with a reputation for opportunity for social mobility for Black people. While some Black people do thrive economically and socially in Atlanta, research shows that many—especially those native to the city—do not (Hobson, 2017). Critical race encouraged an analysis that considered the beneficiaries of the Black Mecca image and how that might influence the values and definitions that participants reported. While a Black middle class does exist, a critical race analysis warranted that I consider how the class' quality of life is complicated by political agendas that benefit White elites' economic and social interests or neoliberal agendas.

The third tenet is social construction or historical contextualization (Delgado &

Stefancic; Taylor et al., 2016). The idea of this tenet is that racial categorization is created by society, manipulated, dismantled, and reconstructed over time (Omi & Winant, 2015). Race studies must consider the process of racial formation and investigate data for racialization that changes as the sociopolitical landscape shifts. The interview narratives gathered from participants contained a myriad of social, legal, and economic indicators of a racialized experience. Race studies must consider that processes such as upward mobility occur within the context of a racialized/racist society. This means that upward mobility goals and ideologies, cultural values, and the role of education in upward mobility may look different when a group must contend with social injustices that are race-group specific.

In alignment with this tenet of CRT, the terms "racialized" or "racialization" are used frequently throughout this study. Critical race theorists Omi & Winant (1994, 2015) argue that theorists must reconsider the use of racial categories to define people because it can perpetuate "the assumption that race is a sociobiological concept and fails to problematize the racist roots of racial categorization" (Nasir, 2012, p. 4). AnaLouise Keating, Multicultural Women's & Gender Studies Professor at Texas Woman's University, states that although critical theorists agree that racial classification is socially constructed, their continued analysis of racialized identities counters their belief that race is symbiotically connected to sociohistorical factors instead of biology (Keating, 1995). In this study, the term racialized is used to accomplish two goals: 1) to make an earnest "effort to honor the idea that race (and thus racial identities) is not an inherent category but rather is *made racial* through interaction, positioning, and discourse; and 2) give hyper-focus to the ways in which "the construction and maintenance of racial boundaries (which are part and parcel of how these identities are constructed in social settings) are key to understanding the experiences of racial subjects" (Nasir, 2015, p. 5). The terms racialization or

racialized are used to signal that race and racial categories are created through social processes. In addition, designing a study to intentionally define the sample using racial classification also highlights how race and the process of racialization play an essential role in the lives of the participants.

A fourth aspect of CRT is that experiential knowledge or narratives should be centered (Taylor, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The marginalization of Black people makes it essential to center their voices in the studies that seek to influence the epistemological canon regarding Black truths. This tenet of CRT informed the data collection methods of this study: concept mapping and phenomenological interviews. These methods relied primarily on Black experiential knowledge and voices to interrogate and label their beliefs and values. Phenomenological interviews aim to "understand the participants' feelings, perceptions and understandings…in their own words" (Roulston, 2010, p. 16). During phenomenological interviewing, participants are invited to share their experiences and stories. Storytelling is a tool to "analyze the myths, presuppositions, and receive wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render Black and other minorities as one-down" (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv). These narratives are important because they work to challenge notions of objectivity that undergird positivist approaches to research. Storytelling is ideal when studying people of color for three reasons: 1) reality is socially constructed; 2) it provides members of marginalized groups with a tool for psychological self-preservation; and 3) the exchange of stories from teller to listener aids with overcoming ethnocentrism and the drive to view the world from one perspective (Delgado, 1989,). The stories shared during the phenomenological interviews fostered an understanding of the nature of social mobility within the study group. Concept mapping is a process completely driven by participants' meanings and values. I ensured that data

collection occurred with integrity and facilitated the statistical analysis of data; however, the interpretation of statistical findings is heavily reliant upon the participants' perspectives. Once the analysis was conducted, participants were invited to interpret the results. This study's process relied on the voices of those most impacted by the topic of research throughout each stage of data collection and analysis (Kane & Rosas, 2018).

Another aspect of CRT is to critique liberalism and discourses born out of it, such as merit-based social mobility or colorblindness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 27). Liberalism argues that despite slow movement, civil rights have resulted in positive linear progression for people of color. Liberalism does not acknowledge the limits of the contemporary legal or social paradigm. It does not admit that small incremental changes fail to dismantle structural racism and inequality. Critical legal scholars argue, in contrast, that sweeping and fast-enacted changes are required to dismantle racism. This is helpful when investigating social mobility narratives in a population severely impacted by the limits of the contemporary social and legal paradigm. Although the participants belong to a social class that is seemingly privileged, research shows that the experiences of the Black middle class are not synonymous with their non-marginalized counterparts. It was important to explore where and how data problematized liberal discourses. It also was imperative to capture conceptualizations of success that differed from dominant understandings.

A fifth and more recent tenet of CRT is the concept of differential racialization. This tenet asserts that dominant society racializes different demographics of color at different times in response to shifting needs in the labor market:

> …The Japanese, including citizens of long standing, may have been in intense disfavor and removed to war relocation camps, while society cultivated other groups of color for

> jobs in war industry or as cannon fodder on the front. In one era, Muslims are somewhat exotic neighbors who go to mosques and pray several times of day—harmless but odd. A few years later, they emerge as security threats. (Delgado, 2017, p. 10)

CRT was especially appropriate for this inquiry because the study endeavored to understand the racialized class experiences of a specific demographic. The data methods of this study were appropriate to capture the idiosyncrasies of the core Black middle-class success definitions and values.

Positionality

I hope that the passion and commitment to conduct this study with integrity, rigor, and cultural and spiritual responsibility are well evidenced throughout this manuscript. The philosophical and subsequent theoretical paradigms that shape this inquiry are of the critical philosophical tradition. Critical researchers work "intimately to uncover the "nature of truth and the construction of knowledge" (Merriam, 2009, p. 35). A researcher's positionality significantly influences every aspect of a study and is especially central to the construction of knowledge that occurs in a study. Being transparent about my positionality to this topic of inquiry enables readers of this study "to know how my identity relates to the research topic, to the identity of the participants, and how it may have influenced this project (Roberts et al., 2020). Transparency is also in alignment with a commitment to critical scholarship.

I present these findings from my standpoint as an African American female in her late 30s, an Atlanta transplant of 14 years, college educated, and with an annual salary within the range being studied in this research. I moved to Atlanta, GA, to continue in my pursuit of "making it"—I wanted to experience social mobility. Since moving to Atlanta, I have taken advantage of life-changing professional opportunities and experienced challenges that seemed to

make my world stop. For example, I was raised in a South, GA, working-class family. Although my parents had the financial resources to acquire our needs and many of the things/experiences my siblings and I wanted, our family did not have wealth. My college education was funded by student loans and my ingenuity to find funding sources. Throughout my doctorate studies, I have maintained full-time employment, a graduate assistantship, and full-time enrollment in doctorate courses simultaneously to afford tuition and secure livable wages. I have countless other examples of how my social and economic class has dictated access to resources and opportunities.

I was interested in this topic because I became acutely aware of how my class, racial, and gendered realities resulted in a different experience with merit-based achievement than what had been described. Like many Black people, I truly believed that being high achieving as a student, socially involved, someone with a degree of savoir-faire, and ambitious in professional pursuits would result in reaching my goals or be successful. My life experiences have resulted in my passion for critically understanding how racialization impacts my experiences within a presumed meritocracy. I am also passionate about identifying challenges and privileges that come with my life's realities so that I can navigate life strategically for the best quality of life possible. In addition, I also felt especially called to contribute scholarship to further understand social injustice and the fallacies of meritocracy, especially in seemingly privileged Black populations.

To minimize the influence of my interpretive lens, the study's methodological design was intentionally selected to be led by the participants' interpretive lens. Concept mapping invites participants to respond to findings at each point in data collection and created the conceptual framework of the topic based solely on participant input. The findings from concept mapping directly informed topics that were explored during interviews. Finally, I bracketed information I

assumed to "know" based on my orientation to this topic. I intentionally asked questions to participants during interviews to allow their wisdoms to inform areas of experiential similarities.

Overview of the Study

To conduct this study, I used an integrated mixed methodological design to collect data via concept maps and semi-structured phenomenological interviews from Black people who fit the following criteria: 1) income between $50,000 - $100,000 annually, 2) college educated, 3) a resident of Atlanta, Georgia a minimum of five years, 4) between the ages of 25 and 55, and 5) self-identify as Black or African American. The purpose of this study was fourfold. First, it centered the voices of core Black middle-class people to define success and motivators of upward mobility. Second, it examined core Black middle-class cultural values and if and how their social equity concerns influenced success ideologies and goals. Third, it developed a success and social equity conceptual framework from an understudied Black middle-class demographic to interrogate the intersection of education, upward mobility, class, and social justice values. Fourth, it juxtaposed contemporary and historical education, social equity, and class values to examine differences and alignment. This study is an addition to the success and achievement literature regarding the understudied core Black middle class. Data analysis was guided by the tenets of critical race theory (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Delgado, 1995) and historical class and education theories. Concept mapping and semi-structured phenomenological were appropriate data methods for this study because this study aimed to analyze definitions, identify education and cultural values, and label motivators of achievement and social mobility within the core Black middle class. An integrated mixed-methodological research approach guided me in illustrating a comprehensive and culturally informed description of Atlanta's core Black middle-class education, social equity, and class values.

Summary

E. Franklin Frazier and Carter G. Woodson both expressed grave concerns about Black people who experienced class mobility. Whether it is via economic opportunity or education opportunity, both sociologists believed that those who experienced upward mobility should remain connected to and concerned with the social and political plight of the Black collective. Frazier and Woodson believed that the Black middle class possessed immense potential to improve the social condition of the Black population; however, this potential would not be realized if cultural traditions and social justice issues were abandoned in the pursuit of social mobility. Coveting and assimilating into White culture and adopting White values would ultimately result in stagnation for the entire race. Instead of aspiring to be like their White counterparts, upwardly mobile Blacks should leverage their privilege to effect political and social change for the Black collective.

The social and political landscape has changed since Woodson and Frazier expressed their concerns about Black middle-class culture. As a result, Black middle-class studies now face new research challenges. Growth in the size of the Black middle class requires that study designs acknowledge diversity in the demographic. Studies must also clearly explain definitions of the Black middle class and differentiate experiences between working, core, and upper-middle-class people. This study responded to this research opportunity in the literature by utilizing an integrated mixed-methodological research design to examine an understudied nuance in the Black middle class.

This chapter included a discussion of the social context of the issue and the problem addressed by this research. This chapter also presented research questions, the study's

significance, theoretical framework, and overview. Assumptions were also discussed. The next chapter presents a survey of the literature relevant to this inquiry.

CHATPER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The work of historians and sociologists documents the complex and arduous stories of African American social mobility. The literary canon on this topic provides ample examples of events and occurrences that display the ability of Black people to carve out achievements that change their quality of life while simultaneously contending with societal injustices that barred access to resources and opportunity. For this reason, success definitions, social mobility, and cultural values for Black people do not materialize in the same way as privileged groups in society. Therefore, analysis of historical and literary discussions on this topic must be approached critically to understand the latent and apparent implications of the motifs, concepts, and cultural values that have been documented. In addition, the sociohistorical reality of Black people in the United States also signals to the critical researcher that there are stories and perspectives that have not been recorded. This literature review will analyze the historical events of three post-emancipation eras that inform current Black middle-class educational values, conceptualizations of and motivations for success, bourgeoisie notions, and the importance of equity and social justice to the Black middle class. The literature discussion will conclude with an analysis of contemporary developments in the Black middle class and the historical materialization of achievement and social equity in Atlanta, Georgia. The literature discussion will also highlight research opportunities in the literature.

The history of Black people and their struggle for upward mobility is vast. The historical moments discussed in this literature review reflect themes and motifs that are central to the inquiry of this study; however, this discussion does not capture all significant or influential moments that shape social mobility, educational attainment, conceptualizations and motivations for success, and the importance of equity and social justice to Black middle-class people. The

first period, 1865-1890, demonstrates how Black social mobility and achievement began within the context of newfound emancipation. According to E. Franklin Frazier, this period in African American history resulted in the "spirit of business enterprise" and bourgeoisie ideals becoming more pervasive within the Black community (Frazier, 1957, pp. 36-38). The second period, 1945-1970, documents historical moments and sociological themes that emerged during the second great migration and the civil rights era; illustrating how values of political involvement, economic advancement, educational achievement, and social protests against racial inequity are key components of Black upward mobility. Some sociologists argue that historical events of this era are unparalleled in influence on current Black middle-class culture, equity and social justice values, and social mobility trends (Brown, 2013; Lacy, 2007; Pattillo, 1999). The third period, 1990-2017, illustrates how African Americans were able to leverage the legal accomplishments from the 60s and 70s to construct a stable Black middle class and achieve unprecedented public notoriety. The expansion of the Black middle class during this period resulted in a diverse middle-class population with differentiated experiences, class values, and conceptualizations regarding success (Lacy, 2007; Landry, 2018; Young, Berry, & Tsemo, 2011; Claytor, 2020). A major shift in Black class dynamics in this era was the ability to use income as a middle-class indicator.

Three Influential Eras of Black Social Mobility

Free Blacks as the Foundation

Beginning in the antebellum period, education, social and professional achievement, distinct class cultural expressions, and anti-racism political activism have been constant elements of Black culture, social mobility, and social justice values. African Americans have always had to express these values within the confines of extreme racism. Much of the racism and

discrimination was legally sanctioned. Laws and legal policies that sought to criminalize violence against Blacks or to politically empower the population were undermined by aggressive efforts of White Americans. The economic systems of antebellum America benefited White dominance and White economic empowerment. Black social and political empowerment threatened White culture and ways of knowing. Black achievement and class culture are often chronicled by beginning with post-antebellum history because Black enslavement prevented thorough record keeping of Black economic advancement, class development, and cultural idiosyncrasies (Frazier, 1957; Lacy, 2007; Pattillo, 1999; Wilson, 1978). Despite this, tracing some social and cultural influences of Black ideals and values to populations in the antebellum period is possible.

Before the widespread opportunity to participate in the economic systems of America was available to Black populations, racial hierarchy, the basis of slavery, dictated class identity. A family heritage with bi-racial ancestry was one of the most common entry points into upper-class status during this era; however, some Black people were born free because their parents had attained freedom (Walls, 1998). The history of bi-racial ancestry resulted in many upper-class Blacks during this era possessing three characteristics: lighter skin, access to White culture and lifestyles, and skilled labor training. Because many free Black persons were descendants of or were house laborers, they had interaction and exposure to White culture and skilled labor training (Frazier, 1957; Lacy, 2007). Enslaved Black people who labored outside of White homes did not have many opportunities to access social or economic resources that could result in economic or social mobility. As a result, the number of Blacks who had any class status was mostly limited to free Black persons. Until the Civil War ended, the conditions for a sizeable and identifiable Black middle class to form did not exist.

Although small in number, the behaviors and lifestyles of free Blacks of antebellum America are important to note because their existence demonstrates that social mobility and enterprise are not contemporary developments of Black American characteristics. Many of the free Blacks' class expressions and cultural practices in the antebellum period influenced how Black people began to embody class positions and conceptualize success upon emancipation. Some of the early class cultural values included educational achievement, assimilation into White culture, and skill acquisition (Wilson; 1978 Landry, 2007). In addition, there were free Black persons—some born to free Black parents—that were part of the Black upper class, such as Alexander Crummell and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who established values of resistance to White dominance and enslavement and political activism to uplift the Black race as upper-class values (Alexander, 2020; Walls, 1998). While the emancipated Black masses largely did not have access to resources to embody these ideals, those that did were the forefathers and mothers of the Black middle class. Once the opportunity to advance became widespread and Black people began to formulate class identities within the new context of emancipation, some of the cultural practices and values of the old Black middle class were questioned and denounced, causing scholars such as E. Franklin Frazier and Carter G. Woodson to critique the cultural practices and values of the emergent Black middle class. Critique and guidance regarding Black values and culture became the subjects of Woodson's and Frazier's scholarship.

1865-1890: Black Bourgeoisie Ideals of Thrift & Higher Education

Between 1865 and 1890, Reconstruction Era social reforms increased access to opportunities for emancipated Blacks to communicate values and priorities regarding financial stability, thrift, and acquiring higher education. Post-emancipation, African Americans began to participate more widely in social, business, and professional spaces that reflected their values

and ideals for achievement. Before emancipation, African Americans were relegated to real estate purchases for religious and educational purposes. They were barred from buying property to use for other services. According to Barbara Josiah's, professor of History at John Jay College, research on the persistence of thrift amongst African Americans, religious and education establishments provided the opportunity for many African Americans to obtain direct experience with conducting business and offering financial services (Josiah, 2004). Another common practice in the Black community prior to emancipation was for Civil War soldiers to make deposits into military savings banks. These pre-emancipation practices were able to become more widespread upon emancipation. Although emancipation was meant to end the inhumane institution of slavery, the immediate reality was that it ignited nationwide social upheaval. Emancipated Blacks were freed with no means to provide food or shelter. In addition, most White businesses would not provide services to newly emancipated Blacks. Reconstruction reforms were mostly directed at enfranchising the emancipated Black population.

Military savings banks that had previously serviced Black Civil War soldiers provided one avenue for Reconstruction reformers to support emancipated Blacks. Forfeited funds from military savings banks provided a large amount of money that could be leveraged for Black benefit. Death, name changes, and unclaimed deposits left after the war ended resulted in the availability of hundreds of thousands of dollars in unclaimed monies in military saving banks. In an effort to assist the Black population, Reconstruction politicians persuaded Congress to allow the funds from forfeited military savings deposits to benefit formerly enslaved Black people. In April 1865, Congress endorsed a plan to open a bank for Black people—The Freedman's Savings Bank (FSB). The first branch was opened in New York City. Though the bank eventually failed in 1874, the sizeable following it amassed demonstrated that the Black population was ready to

participate in the business and economic systems of the nation:

> When the FSB failed in June 1874, it owed almost $3 million to over 61,000 depositors across the United States. During its existence, approximately 70,000 persons had opened or closed savings and other types of accounts totaling over $50 million. At the time of FSB's collapse, the District branch had over 3,000 depositors, the overwhelming majority of whom were working-class African Americans and their cultural institutions. (Josiah, 2004, p. 2)

Many efforts were made to save FSB from becoming a failed Reconstruction economic reform. The appointment of Fredrick Douglass as the President of FSB illustrated how important FSB was as a business and financial organ in the Black community. When Douglass was appointed president of the bank in 1874, he was one of the most influential political thought leaders of the time. While Douglas made considerable effort to save the financial institution from failure, the social context during Reconstruction proved to be too turbulent for the newly minted financial institution (Office of The Comptroller of Currency, 2020). Novices who were not yet ready to lead a financial institution managed some branches. Compounding the inexperienced leadership was the hostility of Southern Whites. Southern Whites aimed to stop progressive social reforms that sought to empower emancipated Blacks. In addition, economic reforms created by the government during Reconstruction often needed to be more suited to confront the nation's complex societal challenges during this era. Governmental and social instability resulted in the ultimate failure of the Freedman's Savings Bank (Josiah, 2007). Despite the failure of FSB, it was successful in popularizing middle-class concepts in the Black community (Frazier, 1957). Literature provided by the bank discussed the importance of saving and how interest earned would result in financial stability. The number of independently owned Black banks that opened

after the Freedman's Savings Banks closed proves positive of the influence of ideologies of thrift and enterprise made more popular through the bank's propaganda. Between the years 1888 and 1910, 134 banks were opened (Josiah, 2004). These institutions failed as quickly as they began; however, the sheer number of institutions that were attempted indicates that the Black population held an enterprising spirit and would participate in the nation's financial ecosystem when the opportunity was presented.

Higher education quickly became a staple in emancipated African Americans' cultural practices and achievement values. Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were founded and funded by philanthropic associations, churches, local communities, missionaries, and private donors, with more than 200 being founded by 1890 (Brown, 2013). Before the Civil War, only a few Black Americans had access and opportunity to attend colleges in the North. The South did not admit African Americans into higher education institutions because it was believed that Black education resulted in the development of Black agencies and slave rebellions (Brooks & Starks, 2011; Brown, 2013). The Morrill Act of 1862 and the Hatch Act of 1887 added a new founder and funder of HBCUs via governmental sanction to create educational institutions focused on agricultural and mechanical arts. In 1890, the Second Morrill Act provided more legislation that directly resulted in the founding of Black colleges and universities. The Second Morrill Act "forbade racial discrimination in admission policies for colleges receiving federal funds [from the first Morrill Act]." A state could "escape this provision…if separate institutions were maintained and the funds divided in a 'just'…manner. . .the act led to the establishment of land grant institutions for African Americans" (National Research Council, 1995, p. 2). Though there were varying opinions about the focus of higher education for Black people, challenges with the nation's readiness to integrate higher education

resulted in the proliferation of separate higher education institutions for Black people (Starks & Brooks, 2011, p. 184). Many of these institutions still exist in 2023. Some of the institutions established during this era are Alabama A&M (1875), Clark-Atlanta University (1988)—initially, two separate colleges that joined forces: Atlanta University (1865) and Clark College (1869)—Fisk University (1866), Hampton University (1868), Morehouse College (1867), Spelman College (1881), and Tuskegee University (1881) (Brooks & Starks, 2011; Brown, 2013). The proliferation of Black institutions of higher education allowed the Black community to express their values regarding higher education. In addition, higher education was one of the primary social resources that could be leveraged to experience social mobility during this era. Black higher education institutions were established at such a fast rate for varying social reasons. Although there was a want and need, separate institutions for Black education converged with the segregation interests of Southern White America. Despite the good outcome of the proliferation of HBCUs, the Morrill Acts also aided in cementing status quo segregation (Brown, 2013). Despite their origins, the longevity of these institutions underscores the fact that Black colleges and universities remain to be valued by the Black community and are still an integral part of how Black people prepare to participate in the social and business aspects of society.

Grappling with newfound freedom, the Black masses between 1865-1890 established values and ideals for achievement that have persisted in the Black community since this era. Emancipated Blacks sought to have financial stability, business acumen, and higher education. Undoubtedly, newly freed Blacks' values and priorities were heavily influenced by the harsh social reality of emancipation. Economic considerations were some of the most pressing because of the need for food and shelter. The Freedman's Savings Bank not only provided the opportunity to participate in the financial business of society, but it also provided increased access to the

opportunity for Black people to express bourgeois values of thrift and financial stability that aligned with their cultural and class identities. The enterprising spirit of newly freed Blacks also steered them to the practices and societal spaces that would bolster their chances for survival in their newfound freedom. Higher education was one of those social spaces. The behaviors and values that emerged as African Americans contended with newfound freedom constructed the foundation for what would become Black middle-class culture. The values and cultural practices of upwardly mobile Black people would also become the focus of the concerned critiques of Du Bois, Woodson, and Frazier, as they believed that the resources that resulted from social advancement should be reinvested into the cause of overall racial advancement.

1945-1970: Social Mobility, Educational Attainment, & Political Activism

The 25 years between 1945-1970 provide myriad examples of how social mobility and social equity are inextricably connected for Black Americans. The sociopolitical events during this era illustrated the connection so intensely that the two phenomena are sometimes challenging to identify as separate phenomena. It must also be noted that advancement between 1945- 1970 was only possible because of critical political activity that continued to counter systemic racism after the Reconstruction Era ended. For example, Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (1914-1927) or the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (founded in 1909) were pivotal in creating the conditions for the wave of advancements that occurred during this era.

To have access to the social, economic, and political promises of emancipation, many Black people had to physically relocate from Southern states. The mass exodus of African Americans from the South is known as the Great Migration; however, there are two distinct periods. The first period of migration began around 1916. This migration was a direct response

to the racial hostility present in Southern states. Most Southern states adopted Black Codes to reverse Reconstruction Era reforms (Onions, Sullivan, & Mullen, 2021; United States Government, 2022). Black Code laws and policies violated the principles of free labor by enforcing fines on employers who paid high wages to Black people. The laws also relegated Black people to socially undesirable and low-wage paying jobs. Although peonage was outlawed in 1867, the new constitutions of former Confederate states forced peonage through legal sharecropping (Bill of Rights Institute, n.d). Black Codes also allowed the racial violence of the Ku Klux Klan to go unfettered, failing to provide equal protection as mandated by the 14th amendment. Black Code laws also created grandfather clauses and poll taxes to prevent Black people from voting; rights provided by the 15th amendment. When larger cities in the South did not reinforce Black Codes, inner-city Whites demanded more restriction of Black people; this resulted in the wider spread of Black Codes that eventually became known as a legal system called Jim Crow. Jim Crow laws were also used to reverse Reconstruction legislation and effectively made Black people second-class citizens by re-segregating society in all public facilities (Onion, Sullivan, & Mullen, 2009). Black Codes and Jim Crow laws enraged Black people and Northern employers. As a result, Black people left the South by the thousands to escape the confining economic and social constraints. According to Pattillo (1999), "six and half million southern African Americans migrated northward between 1910 and 1970" (p. 16). In a second exodus from the South, four million migrants moved between the years 1940 and 1970 (Boustan, 2009). Some scholars called the second exodus of Blacks from the South “The Second Great Migration”:

> Somewhat ironically, the Great Migration's sequel during and following World War II has not been given its own title by scholars. It is, in fact, often considered to be merely a

> continuation of the earlier movement following a momentary pause during the Depression. In many ways, however, this second huge exodus from the South deserves a separate identity; it was larger, more sustained, different in character and direction, and precipitated an even more radical and lasting transformation in American life than its better-known predecessor. (Dodson & Diouf, 2005)

The large relocation doubled the Black workforce of the North and increased access to jobs and wages in the Black population. The number of African Americans who migrated during this second exodus was three times larger than the population that migrated during the first thirty years of relocation. About thirty to forty percent of migrants originated from the South. By 1970, “roughly one of every seven [B]lack Southerners pulled up stakes and headed north or west" (Dodson & Diouf, 2005). Migration trends show that people from Alabama moved to Detroit; Black people from the Carolinas and Georgia moved to New York, Philadelphia, and Boston; and Mississippi and Arkansas Black residents migrated to Chicago. A new migration trend that began with the Second Great Migration was movement to California. Black migrants to California mostly came from Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. While migrants came from a variety of Southern states, people most frequently migrated from the South Atlantic states, with Georgia and the two Carolinas experiencing the most significant loss of Black citizenry:

> [South Atlantics states accounted for] 30 to 40 percent of those leaving the South in each decade. This is particularly striking given that Delaware, Maryland, the District of Columbia, and Florida usually had net gains in their [B]lack population during this period. Thus, the combined totals for the region mask the fact that the two Carolinas and Georgia experienced a virtual hemorrhage of their [B]lack citizenry. Well over half a

million African Americans left those three states in each of the three postwar decades. (Dodson & Diouf, 2005)

Class status and definitions also shifted during this migration. By 1950, the number of African Americans working in agriculture or domestic labor decreased. Although migration was an influencing factor, the mechanization of farm labor greatly influenced how African Americans worked as tenant farmers and African American presence on Southern farms (Dodson & Diouf, 2005; Woodruff, 1994). With the increased opportunity for employment and exposure to the cultural norms of urban cities, "the kinds of distinctions made vis-à-vis one another—gradually became more rooted in education, occupation, and income and less tied with skin color and ancestry (Lacy, 2007, p. 30). Blacks who moved North did not only take advantage of the industrial jobs available in the city, they also engaged in entrepreneurial endeavors. Although Blacks were able to acquire jobs with White companies in the North, society was not yet integrated. As a result, entrepreneurial Blacks were able to create jobs that provided services to other Blacks. Blacks who created businesses to service their community became the foundation for the new Black middle class (Pattillo, 1999).

The emerging Black middle-class occupations included clerical positions, doctors, teachers, insurance agents, and funeral directors (Frazier, 1957; Lacy, 2007). In contrast to mulatto elites whose association with Whites was significant in situating class status, new middle-class Blacks benefitted in racially segregated environments. When the Black masses could not seek out mainstream or White companies to provide healthcare or insurance, they had to rely on trained Black professionals to provide these services. The same was true for Black politicians seeking to earn the political vote of the Black masses. Black people also began to have distinctly varied lived experiences. In the sociological study of stable middle-class Black

people in Washington D.C., *Blue Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class* (2007), Karyn Lacy explains that ancestry and lighter skin structured the lives of mulatto elites. In contrast, occupational differentiation, achievement, and refinement structured the lives of the emergent middle-class Blacks (p. 27-28). Education became a marker of class status and also informed who was considered successful and high achieving. Educational attainment contrasted middle-class Blacks with working-class counterparts. Lacy includes a quote from St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's *Black Metropolis* (1945) to explain the importance of educational achievement to the new Black middle class:

> Persons who wish to circulate near the 'top' [of the class structure], whatever they lack in money or job, must have enough education to avoid grammatical blunders, and to allow them to converse intelligently. Ignorant 'breaks' and inability to cite evidence of education—formal and informal—can bar a person permanently from the top. (Lacy, 2007, p. 27)

Influenced by ideologies and values that became more widespread between 1865-1890, emergent middle-class Blacks could access middle-class status because of the increased opportunities to acquire higher education and participate in the nation's economy. The Great Migration shifted some of the stressors of economic scarcity because more families were able to access higher wages. Children no longer needed to supplement family incomes and could matriculate schools, making them prepared to enter higher education institutions upon graduation (Wilson, 1978). Southern states also contributed to the increase in Black student enrollment in higher education. Southern contributions to the United Negro Fund, founded in 1944, significantly increased when a 1938 Supreme Court ruling stated that a Missouri law school was legally required to admit Blacks or provide a separate law school for their attendance. Southern states, following in the

footsteps of this Missouri law school, also elected to provide separate education institutions to service Black people. Contributions to the United Negro Fund, in addition to Black religious institutions, resulted in an increase in Black college enrollment from 40,000 in 1940 to 105,000 by the mid-1960s (Brooks & Starks, 2011). As the number of college-educated Blacks began to increase, occupational diversity continued to expand for Black people. The Black middle class grew, though slowly in the beginning, as opportunity increased. Despite this increase, African American economic advancements paled in comparison to the economics of White society. Blacks were still not privy to full and equitable economic inclusion. Income, though improving, did not yet inform class status. Educational attainment became the most significant indicator of class status (Lacy, 2007). As Blacks continued to work for access to educational, economic, and social opportunities, they also leveraged the momentum of prior political activism to dismantle systemic legal and political issues that would result in permanent equitable access to resources and opportunities.

The political changes in America after passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 created the conditions for a "real" Black middle class to evolve. Federal legislation barred discrimination based on race or gender in employment and education, resulting in increased access to "education and white-collar jobs" (Lacy, 2007, p. 30). These changes enabled more Black people to achieve a middle-class status that more closely mimicked conventional characterizations of class positioning (Lacy, 2007; Wilson, 1978). Contrasting the ideas presented in E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957*)*, middle-class Blacks exhibited an immense interest in political action and a need for civil and social change in the overall treatment of Black people (Pattillo, 1999). The intentionality and force of political activism of this era led to the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1952, *Brown v. Board of Education II* and The

Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and Fair Housing Act of 1968 (Klarman, 2007; Onion, Sullivan, & Mullen, 2009). Before this series of sociopolitical events, states with larger concentrations of African Americans working in industrial sectors also saw the passage of anti-discrimination civil rights laws. Some of these states include New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts (Wilson, 1978). While the civil rights legislation and protests increased awareness throughout the Black masses regarding the need for political action, much of the initial civil rights efforts stemmed from Black professional groups and students. Wilson (1978) explained the political activity of the 1950s and 1960s:

> The distinctive feature of these protests, which took the form of sit-ins, freedom rides, and the like, was that they were led and organized by educated [B]lacks, many of whom were college students. These [B]lack activists recognized and clearly articulated the view that because of the increasing [B]lack political resources, the pressure of nonviolent protests, and the United States concern for world-wide opinion of her racial crisis, the government was likely to react to disciplined nonviolent movement for civil rights with the enactment of anti-discrimination laws. (Wilson, 1978, p. 136)

The political protests eventually shifted toward the latter half of the 1960s to include working-class Blacks. Middle-class Blacks were able to initiate many of the efforts because they had disposable income to support organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement For Colored People (NAACP). Middle-class Blacks were also acutely focused on securing access to resources that would stabilize their class positions. In addition, middle-class incomes afforded the luxury of focusing on resolving social issues. Instead of being disconnected from Black cultural and social concerns, middle-class Blacks were highly involved in politics (Pattillo, 1999). Political activism also influenced governmental pressure on companies to show

affirmative action efforts throughout 1964 and 1965. As a result, corporations worked to explicitly recruit from Black colleges and universities. The recruitment of Black students, along with growth in jobs in the government, resulted in an increase of African American white-collar workers between 1964 and 1974 (Lacy, 2009).

The Great Migration enabled a shift in occupational diversity and the development of a cohort of Black professionals and entrepreneurs. Class status shifted from being primarily about White ancestry to being informed by educational attainment. Black college enrollment expanded the recruitment of Black students for professional jobs, and the number of Blacks in white-collar and high-level professional positions increased. These Black professionals, less stressed with economic burdens, were able to focus on political and civic engagement that resulted in the passage of civil rights legislations on state and federal levels. Although migration offered increased chances for income and education, it also painfully reiterated that racism was not confined to the Southern states. Racism was an American practice, not a Southern practice. The racial conflicts and political discourse shifted from being framed as " the Negro Problem of the South" to phrases like "the rise of the ghetto," "the problem of the inner cities," "urban disorders," and "the underclass" (Dodson & Diouf, 2005). While the Black population aimed for upward mobility and social equity, the political and racial climate of America reiterated that the nation had yet to reach the level of maturity that would result in a cessation of practices that thwarted the full inclusion of Black Americans into society. In his sociological study *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), DuBois described Black racial progress by stating: “the slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery” (Chapter 2, para. 48). The Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 1960s and the struggles to obtain equitable education, housing, and voting rights are all testaments to political and social

turbulence that linked upward mobility and social equity. The way that African Americans adapted to navigate so that social mobility could be actualized served as a blueprint and a foreshadowing for future generations. Despite the racial climate, the advancements that took place during this era created the conditions for the Black middle class to expand and stabilize.

1990-2017: Public Integration, a Black President, & Insisting That Black Lives Matter

In the era from 1990 to 2017, Black upward mobility reached new heights that forever changed the social imaginary of what was possible for Black achievement in professional advancement, political activism, mainstream public integration, and middle-class cultural identities. Similar to periods of cyclical progress, after the civil rights legislations from 1950-1970, African Americans faced stagnation, retrenchment of progressive efforts, and blatant acts of racism. Integration and anti-discrimination legislations enabled wide-scale measurements of income, K-12 educational attainment, collegiate enrollment, and homeownership rates (Lacy, 2017). These demographic measures aided with curating conversations that elucidated the continued mistreatment of the Black population. Despite the incongruence between the races, this era was the birthplace of historically unprecedented achievements. A group of fifteen medical student graduates from Tulane University poignantly captured the era's zeitgeist by captioning a picture of them posted to social media with the statement, "we are our ancestors' wildest dreams" (Shammas, 2019). The picture was taken in front of a former slave cabin on the Whitney Plantation in Louisiana. While much remains to be realized with regard to social justice and equity, this period presented African Americans with a sociopolitical reality that was different in many ways from the realities of their enslaved or newly emancipated ancestors.

At the top of the 90s decade, an incident of police brutality that took place in Los Angeles traumatized Black communities throughout the nation with a reminder that the vestiges of Black

Code and Jim Crow America had yet to be fully dismantled. The 1992 decision regarding the filmed brutalization of Rodney King, an unarmed Black man, by police sparked riots throughout the United States, with Los Angeles being the epicenter of the protests. In this case, the police attempted to stop King for speeding. King refused to stop and engaged the police in a high-speed chase. The chase culminated with King being shot with a TASER gun and then being beaten by several police officers. Despite evidence via a recording, the police officers were acquitted. By the end of the public outcry, rioting, and protests for criminal justice equity in response to this decision, 55 people were dead, 2,300 were injured, and over 1,000 buildings had been burned. The total damage was estimated to be close to $1 billion (Bennett et al., 2021; Onions, Sullivan, & Mullen, 2021; Sastry & Bates, 2017). Two of the officers involved in the beating were retired two years later and convicted in a federal court for violating King's civil rights. King eventually received a settlement of $3.8 million from the city of Los Angeles. The L.A. riots were a reaffirming signal to the American legal system and the public that the Black masses would not quietly ask for equity. In addition, racial violence would be met with aggressive force and social organizing. The King incident was one of the most media-covered legal cases because of the video footage of the incident. Although it took place in Los Angeles, Black Americans across the nation felt traumatized and catalyzed to continue the work of dismantling racial inequity. Unfortunately, Rodney King's case was one of many racially motivated acts of violence the nation would witness during this era.

Contrasting this harsh reality was the increase of the presence of Black people in entertainment and dominant cultural spaces. In 1993, writer Toni Morrison became the first Black American to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. The Nobel Prize is awarded annually in five categories for intellectual achievement. The creator of the prize, Swedish

inventor Alfred Nobel, stated that the prizes are awarded to those “who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind” (Nobel Prize, 2021). Another testament to the increase in Black presence in culture and entertainment was the popularity of the Oprah Winfrey Show. Although the show began in 1986, it came to be known as the highest-rated television show in history throughout the 90s and 2000s. Oprah Winfrey, the host of the show, was known for her candid treatment of social and political topics, the promotion of Black writers and aesthetic, and philanthropy. Her achievements resulted in her becoming the first female Black billionaire. While her philanthropic efforts are widespread, her support of Black education has been a significant portion of her philanthropic work (Onions, Sullivan, & Mullen, 2021).

Black political advancements witnessed many firsts in this era. In 2004 Colin Powell became the first Black Secretary of State as a part of Republican President George W. Bush's cabinet. Powell was the first Black person to serve in the nation's top diplomat role. The secretary of state is mainly responsible for managing international policies and networking with the United Nations to guarantee the United States' national security. Colin Powell resigned in 2004 and was replaced by the appointment of Condoleezza Rice. Rice became the first Black woman to serve in this position. In 2008, the political advancements of the Black race reached a culminating point. The first African American was elected as the 44th president of the United States. In an unprecedented moment in American history, Black people and the nation witnessed something that seemed impossible to most, considering the nation's racial history.

Obama was elected during a time of economic hardship for many African Americans. Despite this fact, many believe that the election of a Black person to one of the most respected political positions in the world dramatically inspired and influenced the social mobility

possibilities for African Americans. Social commentators stated that his ascension into this public space signaled that the proverbial "glass ceiling" of Black success had been removed. News commentators and journalists also stated that Black children would experience increased confidence in their ability to achieve to the highest levels in society. A Black president was thought to increase self-efficacy (Gourley, 2018; Stout & Le, 2012). Some sociology researchers argued that Obama's election decreased notions of marginalization for African Americans. Obama represented that Blacks could overcome discrimination and take advantage of opportunities in America. His election significantly shaped what was possible concerning upward mobility for the Black population (Coates, 2017). Sociological literature suggests that Obama's election increased overall belief in the American dream—a dream that purports that social mobility is equally accessible to all Americans. African Americans began to believe that they possessed more control over their fates, and success could include aspirations as high as becoming the president of the United States of America (Stout & Le, 2012). Obama's first election was followed by reelection in 2012. His presidential reign ended in 2017; however, his existence in this office continues to be analyzed to understand its influence on the meanings and definitions that Black people have regarding success.

Although there were tremendous advances, Black people's continued struggle with social justice issues counters ideas that claim the proverbial glass ceiling of achievement had been lifted. In 2012 the death of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin reminded Black people, and the nation, that social equity had yet to be realized. A neighborhood watchman, who was a Hispanic American named George Zimmerman, killed Martin. Despite his ethnic background, the public largely perceived Zimmerman as a White male (Martin, 2012). The controversial case resulted in Zimmerman's acquittal. In addition, the case caused divisiveness throughout the nation regarding

issues of race and the protections owed to Black people. The organization Black Lives Matter (BLM) was founded in 2013 in response to the court's decision. BLM was created with the expressed goal to "eradicate [W]hite supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes" (Black Lives Matter, 2021; Onion, Sullivan, Mullen, 2021). According to Campaign Zero, an organization and research platform dedicated to redefining public safety and minimizing police involvement in communities, more than 12,000 deaths have occurred since Martin was killed from the acts of individuals asserting White dominance or police empowered by the criminal justice systems' racist agendas and historical culture of racial violence toward Black citizens (Campaign Zero, 2022). Black Lives Matter gained renewed attention in 2016 when National Football League (NFL) players began to kneel instead of standing during the American national anthem. NFL players kneeled because the expressed sentiments of the anthem which state that America is the "land of the free;' did not match with the sociohistorical reality of Black Americans (Onion, Sullivan, and Mullen, 2021). The work of BLM and other organizations like it emphasize that Black people are still working—404 years post-slavery and 158 years post-emancipation—to achieve the equity of their White counterparts.

The Diverse Black Middle Class

Income Profile

Income is one of the least subjective determinants of class status. It became possible to use income as an indicator of the Black middle class beginning in the 1990s. As the Black middle class has continued to grow, researchers have delineated other key characteristics that are associated with the class. The key characteristics of middle-class Black folk are educational attainment, occupation, homeownership, and social behaviors. The growth in the Black middle

class warrants a critical approach when discussing and analyzing class dynamics. Although income is the most popular way to discuss the class, it can also oversimplify class experiences (Prince, 2006; Lacy, 2007). When income is used as an indicator of class status, huge variation can occur. For example, in his work *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality* (2004), sociologist Thomas Shapiro defines the middle class as an income range of $17,000 to $79,000. Bruce Haynes uses a figure of $43,500 to identify middle-class Blacks in his work *Red Lines, Black Spaces: The Politics of Race and Space in a Black Middle-Class Suburb* (2001). In a study of middle-class Blacks in Chicago, Mary Pattillo (2013) uses a figure similar to Haynes: $39,500. The middle-class people in her study earned twice the city's poverty level. The issue with income definitions is that they can conflate the lived experiences of each income level. People who earn $17,000 annually live a different day-to-day life than those who earn $79,000.

According to sociologist Karyn Lacy, middle-class people become economically stable at an income level of $50,000 or above. She states that income and lifestyle analysis has shown a "benefit in separating middle-class Blacks who earn $50,000 or more from those who earn less" (Lacy, 2007, p. 35). The reason for this distinction is based on class stability. Top earners have experienced income increases since the 1970s; lower-wage earners have not (Lacy, 2012). This results in a different class experience simply because one group of the middle class is figuring out how to make it from year to year while another demographic within the middle class is situated comfortably within their class position (Lacy, 2007; Prince, 2006). Middle classers who can exist comfortably in class positions can also accumulate wealth and assets. Wealth accumulation enables families to pass class status to the following generations. One example can be observed in homeownership: "only 52 percent of [B]lacks in the $30,000–$49,999 income

category own their own homes, 66 percent of [B]lacks earning more than $50,000 do, as do 80 percent of those earning more than $100,000" (Lacy, 2007, p. 37). Black folk who experience stability in their class status are labeled "Blue-Chip" Black by Lacy. This reference is derived from the notion of blue chip stock options in the stock market. Blue chip stock options are conservative investments that have a long history of upward profit trends. They are less volatile investments and typically guarantee that an investor will earn a return on their investment. Income analysis provides a compelling illustration of why middle-class studies must be intentional in crafting studies that investigate nuances and provide explicit definitions of the middle (Landry, 2007).

Education & Professional Profile

Educational attainment has long been considered essential for Black upward mobility. Despite this fact, many sociologists do not work to concretely establish that educational attainment is required in their middle-class definitions. Income definitions are beneficial; however, educational attainment informs job choices and informs social identities (Claytor, 2020). In *Black Pickett Fences: Privilege & Peril Among the Black Middle Class*, Pattillo (2013) states that of her study participants, 20 percent were degree holders. Pattillo does not delve into this nuance in her study; however, college degree attainment is positively correlated with earnings. The 80 percent who are not degree-holding in her study are more likely to have the kinds of jobs historically associated with lower-middle-class positions (Shapiro, 2004). Statistics on college degree attainment show that "13 percent of the [B]lack lower-middle class hold college degrees, 18 percent of the [B]lack core-middle-class are college graduates, and 28 percent of the [B]lack elite middle class earned college degrees" (Lacy, 2007, p. 38). When talking about middle-class Blacks, it is important to investigate educational attainment as it

typically changes professional opportunities and social networks. Social networks are extremely important in middle-class discourse because these networks aid with connecting to resources and living a middle-class experience (Claytor, 2020; Hobson, 2017). Social networks are also informed by neighborhood location.

Neighborhood Location

Middle-class research in the past has mostly made the argument that middle-class Blacks live in close proximity to working-class and poor neighborhoods (Pattillo, 2005). Julius Wilson argues that Black middle classers have largely out-migrated and live in predominately White neighborhoods (Wilson, 1978). These arguments represent two extremes in defining middle-class Black neighborhoods. Middle-class Blacks have indeed elected to move outside of working-class and poor neighborhoods (Claytor, 2020; Lacy, 2007). However, according to Pattillo (2005), many of the neighborhoods they elected to relocate to were once predominately White. With the advent of White flight from areas with Black neighbors, many Black middle-class residents find themselves back in predominately Black neighborhoods that are adjacent to poor and working-class Black neighborhoods. These neighborhoods are often located near inner-city areas (Pattillo, 2005). Other analyses of out-migration place Blacks in predominately White neighborhoods. White flight, in this scenario, results in Blacks living alongside working-class White neighbors.

Contrasting these findings, Lacy (2007) argues that new trends must be studied. She explained that middle-class Blacks do not live with their White counterparts, nor do they live near working-class or poor Black counterparts. Because of an increasing Black suburban population, many Blacks live in enclaves with other Black middle-class individuals or families. This makes the assumption that majority-White middle-class neighborhoods are attractive to Black middle families incorrect (Lacy, 2007, pp. 43-44).

The variations between these characteristics of the Black middle class underscore the validity of the claim that there is more to analyze about the Black middle class. It is no longer acceptable to discuss the Black middle class without intentional attention to differentiated experiences that exist within the class. Neighborhood location options differ as income levels change. Educational attainment can result in more class stability and occupational choice. Income influences expressions of class identity. As the Black middle class grows, it becomes more important to specify which middle-class demographic is being discussed. The literature at this juncture is over-saturated with discussions of lower-middle-class Blacks that propel discourses about the entire Black middle class. Sociologists and scholars must reframe this conversation, especially those that aim to expand extant literature.

Atlanta, Georgia—The Black Mecca

The Promise of Upward Mobility

Atlanta's history as a city ripe for Black upward mobility extends into the antebellum period. In 1860, Atlanta's population included 493 Blacks and 2058 Whites (Hobson, 2017; National Park Service, 2018). Less than one percent of the Black population, 18 persons, lived as free persons. Despite the unfriendly racial climate towards Black enterprise between 1850 and 1860, some free Blacks achieved notable success. Occupations such as dentists, barbers, and blacksmiths were typical occupations for this population (Hobson, 2017). The war dismantled the exploitive economic system of slavery resulting in the fall of the South’s economy. The South's economy was founded on agriculture and enslaved Blacks' labor. Emancipation necessitated that the South create a new economic system. To revitalize the South's economy, many White civic leaders proposed plans to usher in Northern investments. Prominent Democratic leader, Henry Grady, purported industrial development as the solution to change the

South's struggling economy. As the managing editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, Grady was able to inundate the media with stories of Georgia's fair and equitable treatment of Black populations. Grady's writings were mostly propaganda; however, this framing of the South was instrumental in ushering in a new economic reality for the city of Atlanta (Davis, 1987). Black people who sought to escape hostility and violence in other areas of the state migrated to Atlanta for several reasons. The primary catalyst for migration was economic opportunities that only existed in other areas of the state. Between 1865-1877—the Reconstruction era—Black people were able to make social mobility advancements by migrating to cities such as Atlanta, becoming political leaders, and acquiring higher education (Frazier, 1957; Pattillo, 1999; Wilson, 1978). Reconstruction-era Atlanta reflected Black advancement in education and politics. Atlanta University, Morehouse College, and Clark College were founded during this period. The first African Americans—George Graham and William Finch—were elected to Atlanta's city council during Reconstruction. In addition, Black people were also elected into positions with the Georgia General Assembly and aided with writing Georgia's post-emancipation constitution (Hill & Hill, 2018; Hobson, 2017).

Booker T. Washington

Efforts to obstruct the upward mobility of Blacks were aggressive. As Blacks worked to gain social mobility, Whites maintained the status quo through legal cases that sought to retrench and subdue Black access to resources that could result in upward mobility. Many of these efforts were extremely successful at maintaining White control of the economic systems of the South, thereby barring Blacks' access to opportunities and resources. During the Cotton States and International Exposition of 1895, the South celebrated the economic progress of the South and the resurgence of White domination. Booker T. Washington, one of the era's most prominent

Black political voices, was invited to address the crowd during this exposition. His Atlanta Exposition address came to be known as his most famous speech. The speech advised Black people to focus their efforts on acquiring vocational training. Washington believed that civil and political matters were a waste of effort and focus for the African American race. With teachings such as Washington's dominating public discourse, the popularity of cities known for economic opportunity grew. By the early twentieth century, Atlanta attracted Black migrations that mimicked the nationwide Great Migration of African Americans. Both migrations resulted from Blacks searching for economic and upward mobility. While economic opportunities were tantamount to survival, some political thought leaders thought it unwise to focus on economics singularly. Contrasting the teachings of Booker T. Washington was W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois believed African Americans could only achieve true equality by focusing on civic, economic, and intellectual development.

W.E.B. Du Bois

Du Bois entered the field of Sociology in its infancy and presented theories about race and education that remain relevant in current sociological inquiry and understanding. Du Bois' focus was the social scientific study of Black life. He was particularly interested in the Black experience in Atlanta. His sociological study, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), explored and analyzed the social and class dynamics between professionals and working-class Black folk in Atlanta. His goal was to understand the implications of achievements for Black Atlantans. Du Bois recognized that Atlanta represented economic opportunity to African Americans seeking advancement post-enslavement. Although Du Bois agreed that economics were essential, he felt that a myopic focus on economics would not equate to liberation from social oppression. Du Bois vehemently taught that African Americans should aim to build autonomous communities

complete with Black businesses, Black schools, Black political movements, and Black cultural expressions (Hobson, 2017). He shunned messages that only talked of an economic focus. In *Souls of Black Folk* (1903*)*, he likens Blacks who were enticed with developing trade-oriented skills as a resource to catalyze upward mobility to a character from Greek mythology named Atalanta who had become distracted by golden apples during a race:

> Atalanta is not the first or the last maiden whom greed of gold has led to defile the temple of love; and not maids alone, but men in the race of life, sink from high and generous ideals of youth to the gambler's code of the Bourse; and all in our nation's strivings is not the Gospel of Work befouled by the Gospel of Pay? So common is this that one-half think it is normal; so unquestioned, that we almost fear to question if the end of racing is not gold, if the aim of man is not rightly to be rich And if this is the fault of America, how dire a danger lies before a new land and new city, lest Atlanta, stooping for mere gold, shall find that gold accursed. (Du Bois, 1903, p. 64-65)

His indictment is two-fold. He believed that the city of Atlanta had the potential to be something more than an economic epicenter; it possessed the promise to be a model of culture and the realization of rights guaranteed by the Constitution (Greco, 1984). He urged Blacks who migrated there to aspire for more. Narrowly focusing on economics would handicap the potential of the city and the Black race. Failure to develop the race's intellectual and political faculties ultimately protected the social status quo. Du Bois argued that Blacks would meet their demise if they only developed themselves in ways that could be monetized.

Du Bois wanted Black people to develop into a self-sufficient higher civilization. One of his most popular theories of upward mobility was the theory of the talented tenth. The premise of this theory is that the most adept of the race—a talented ten percent of it—would lead the race in

its struggle for equal rights. Toward this goal, the talented tenth should acquire higher education and become knowledgeable in modern culture. This would be the foundation for ultimately changing the Black race into what he believed was a higher civilization. Du Bois outlined many issues with Washington's ideas. One of the main critiques was that it would require folks with higher education to serve as the teachers for his vocational schools. If people only acquired vocational training, there would eventually be a shortage of teachers to bestow vocational knowledge. In addition, simply developing the race for industrial work would result in perpetual social, political, and economic inequality (Greco, 1984). According to Du Bois' writings in *The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques, 1906-1960,* economic advancement was necessary; however, Black economics must be about the social benefit of the race:

> He viewed each aspect of economic advancement to be important to open the doors in all fields. Du Bois concerned himself with: trade unions, business, collective bargaining, home ownership, the right to work and agriculture…(…) as much as he was an advocate of trade unions he fought them for discrimination practices. Du Bois was also very supportive of Black business but he thought the goal should be of social benefit not just merely a private profit. He was in favor of the cooperative movement and he encouraged Blacks to move out of the South to the North and West for better educational and job opportunities. (Du Bois, 1973; Greco, 1984, p. 84)

The manner in which the talented tenth was educated was extremely important to Du Bois. He thought the training of minds to be an intricate and challenging task. Only visionaries were fit to build and structure the curriculum that would educate African Americans. If money and technical skill were the objects of educational training, colleges would create moneymakers and artisans, but not necessarily men. The true essence of a human could only be achieved if humanity and

manhood were the objects of schools. A curriculum that taught "intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world, and man's relation to it" would teach the true meanings of life (Du Bois, 1903, p. 34). True education would enable access to social status and acculturation. The entire Black race would experience social mobility because the talented of the race would assist the masses with developing the ideals, lifestyles, and behaviors that would circumvent social stagnation. The thesis of his argument was that the most educated and intellectual of the race had elevated the masses in the past, and it would be the same demographic to do so in the twentieth century.

Du Bois' ideas influenced and were similar to those voiced in years to come by Carter G. Woodson and E. Franklin Frazier. His teachings strongly resonated with the students of Atlanta University and the Black population of Atlanta in the 1900s. Undoubtedly, his teachings influenced the proliferation of higher education in the African American population. His ideas also aided with centering Atlanta as a hub for Black higher education. Maurice Hobson, Historian and Professor of Africana Studies at Georgia State University, contends that one of the most significant cultural influences of Du Bois' talented tenth theory is that it created the social space for and undergirded the formation of a rigid Black middle class that is alienated from the masses because of "hereditary rank, profession, and wealth" (Hobson, 2017, p. 25). Despite Du Bois' intention for collective empowerment, his ideologies created a perceptional divide resulting in a clear distinction between the upper social classes and the working class. People who occupied the "respectable" occupations born out of higher education were privileged over others who had acquired common jobs. In 1948 he revised his talented tenth ideology into the hundredth talented to emphasize the importance of morality in leadership and building allegiances with other minorities (Jucan, 2013). Although Du Bois' theory was not solely

responsible for creating African American class divisions, his thoughts gave muscle to a social reality that was already emerging as Blacks strove for social, political, and economic footing. The social class that emerged in Atlanta's Black population as a result was defined by access to exclusive social networks that continually reinforced the importance of class status and social capital.

The Black Mecca Image

Atlanta's history makes for incredibly complex class dynamics for Black people. The dominant discourse is that Atlanta abounds with opportunities for Blacks. When Reconstruction politicians worked to reimage the city, they were able to create industry that rivaled Northern counterparts. In addition, the 1960s and 1970s political and legal advancements shifted the racial climate of the South. Cities such as Atlanta, Nashville, Memphis, and Birmingham attracted large populations of young and professional African Americans. Migration studies between the years 1970 and 1973 show that 247,000 Blacks moved to the South. Most who returned were natives; however, it is estimated that about one-third of the migrants had never lived in the South before (Hobson, 2017). Migrants did not believe the South was simply a land of unfettered opportunity. Many had faired the social ills of the North and could juxtapose that to the new social climate in the South ushered in by civil rights legislation. Atlanta, in particular, offered warmer temperatures, professional economic opportunities, higher education options, political involvement, entrepreneurship, and enterprise:

> In the early 1970s, there was a widespread belief that the South was changing more rapidly than the North. Atlanta was believed to be the best place to live for a person of any race…state-supported and traditionally [W]hite institutions of higher learning had integrated, taking some of the highest performing students from [B]lack institutions.

> Because good [B]lack professors attracted good [B]lack students, a move to preserve the tradition and history of historically [B]lack colleges was underway….[Northern student] transplants found it comforting that they were able to operate in [B]lack institutions, not only colleges but also other kinds of [B]lack-owned and affiliated ventures. Atlanta was also the site of rapid industrial expansion, which created jobs for the whole region and opened employment opportunities for [B]lacks. (Hobson, 2017, p. 63)

By 1973 Atlanta's Black population comprised 40-45 percent of the total population. This created a unique opportunity for African American leaders who intended to galvanize the Black vote. The growing Black population was integral in imaging the city as a Black Mecca. Unfortunately, opportunity was not equally accessible. Most in the educated middle class or established elite class benefited. Natives who had never left the city lived a contrasting reality. Critical analysis of the city's political leadership, educational attainment trends, and income diversity reveal divisive realities regarding the contrasting class experiences of Atlanta's Black population (Hobson, 2018; Stokes, 2018; Sasso, Matthews, & Newkirk, 2019).

Political Leadership and Involvement

Civil Rights legislation created new realities for Black people throughout the nation. These opportunities came in many forms; however, political advancements were especially celebrated because a multitude of new opportunities resulted. Black political advancement was met with extreme resistance throughout the South. Atlanta's demographic afforded a different political climate. The large population of Black people in Atlanta led to the existence of a Black voting block that could oppose White elites who had historically controlled the city's economic and political policy. The election of Maynard Jackson—the city's first Black Mayor—in 1973 was a high point of Black political achievement. Jackson galvanized the Black and White vote;

however, his entrance into Atlanta politics especially resonated with the aspirations of Atlanta's middle class and Black elite (Jones, 1878; Pierannuzi & Hutcheson, 1990). As the child of parents with considerable class status, Jackson graduated from Morehouse College and earned a Juris Doctorate from North Carolina Central University School of Law. In 1970 he was elected as the vice mayor of the city. His campaign pledge was that he would work to be a voice of the people (McCartin, 2005; Pierannuzi & Hutcheson, 1990). Jackson leveraged the voting potential of the influx of Black people who came into the city during the 1970s. His election marked the first election of a Black person in a major Southern city. Mayor Jackson constantly negotiated the demands of elite Whites and elite and middle-class Blacks. Working-class African American concerns were occasionally given consideration, but sincere attempts to address these concerns were rare or non-existent. Some historians argue that his tenure as Mayor illustrated that his political investment aligned more with his personal class identity than with the needs of the majority of his constituents (Hobson, 2017; McCartin, 2005).

Urban renewal and development were a significant focus during the Jackson administration. The Black business class held the Mayor accountable for developing areas that were important for Black businesses. Over time, areas that were critical to Black businesses had suffered from the disinvestment of past administrations that aimed to limit African American achievement. Intentional acts of structural racism propagated by the Central Atlanta Improvement Association's 1946 Lochner Plan expanded Interstate 20 and Atlanta's Downtown Connector (the stretch of Interstate 75 and 85 run conjoined through the city) to cut through Auburn Avenue and hundreds of homes. The result was the effective removal of many working-class Black people from the central business district (Suggs & Mitchell, 2022; Robinson & Simonton, 2019). The construction and displacement of Black residents occurred over twenty

years.

When Jackson came into office, the Black business class pushed for revitalization support. The areas they wanted to revitalize were important to Black culture and the stability of Black middle-class populations. Two programs were created toward the goal of Black business revitalization. The programs targeted Auburn Avenue and Hunter Street. Auburn Avenue, also known as "Sweet Auburn," was home to many of the country's largest Black-owned businesses. Hunter Street was also home to major Black businesses and the location of many significant political and historical events for the Black community (Giarrantano & Sjoquist, 2018). The revitalization efforts were led by a list of officers and directors who were Atlanta's most influential Black business leaders. Hunter Street and Sweet Auburn revitalization projects demonstrated that Jackson would work to center the needs of the Black elite and middle class. In addition to prioritizing their demands, Jackson also provided tangible solutions that kept the middle and elite classes happy with his leadership. Unfortunately, the board members who guided revitalization projects did not attend to the interests of working-class or poor African Americans. Working-class and poor Black folk experienced little to no social reform under Jackson's leadership. They remained in the same social and class position that existed prior to Jackson's election. The political leadership of Jackson exasperated the gap between the classes.

Working-class Blacks' experiences were fettered with economic, political, legal, and social challenges (Hobson, 2017; McCartin, 2005; Robinson & Simonton, 2019). The sanitation strike of 1977 exemplifies how Jackson disregarded working-class needs. The sanitation strike resulted from working-class people demanding that they be paid a more livable wage. Jackson's treatment of the strike illustrated his priorities for the city. Mayor Jackson's solution to end the strike simultaneously impressed middle and elite-class Blacks and disappointed the working and

poor classes. Strikers were left feeling disposable and as if their political needs were invisible. Sanitation workers were unhappy with their work conditions because they wanted a wage increase to $7,000 annually. The raise would leave most families below the poverty line; however, it was a significant increase in money. In response to the demands, Jackson stated that he would terminate all strikers who failed to return to work within forty-eight hours. When strikers continued to protest, the Mayor proceeded with terminations. Black elites, the Black middle class, and White elites supported Jackson's decision to proceed with terminations (McCartin, 2005). Working-class Blacks, however, accused Jackson of ignoring their needs to pander to elite and middle-class Black interests. Middle-class and elite Blacks felt as if working-class Blacks were naïve in believing it was ideal to challenge the city's first Black Mayor. Middle-class and elite Blacks prioritized support for Jackson—the first Black leader of a Southern city—over working-class and poor concerns. Historians who studied Jackson's response to the sanitation strike state that it was a clear demonstration of the intra-racial class dynamics of the city (Hobson, 2017; McCartin, 2005; Pierannuzi & Hutcheson, 1990). The sanitation strike demonstrated who was able to exercise political power and whose class interests would be empowered. Political activism and change were reserved for individuals who aligned with the Black Mecca image. Jackson served two terms in office (1974-1982) and was re-elected in 1990, serving another four years. His time in office was defining for what was possible regarding upward mobility in Atlanta's middle-class and elite Blacks. He also established that Atlanta was ripe for political leadership for successful, high-achieving African Americans.

Since Jackson's first election, Atlanta has only elected Black mayors. Andrew Young (1982), Bill Campbell (1994), Shirley Franklin (2002), Kasim Reed (2010), Keisha L. Bottoms (2018), and Andre Dickens (2022) (Hill & Hill, 2018; Nobles, 2021). The political achievements

of Blacks in the city support The Mecca image. However, observing political achievements alone does not communicate the full reality of Black Atlantans. The characteristics of the Black people elected as Mayor are a testament to the way in which class status and upward mobility interplay to create favorable life outcomes for those positioned to take advantage of its offerings. The Mayors elected possess political agility, educational attainment, professional achievement, and coveted social networks. Arguably, the city's political leaders epitomize upward mobility, evoke reminders of Du Bois' talented tenth ideology, and align with the Black Mecca image.

Educational Attainment

Higher education was established as a factor of upward mobility since emancipation. It became more accessible during the Great Migration and expanded significantly with the passage of anti-discrimination legislation in the 60s and 70s. Atlanta was able to present as a Black Mecca, not only because of the promise of business and professional opportunity but because African Americans could also partake in myriad educational opportunities. Undoubtedly influenced by the ideologies of Du Bois, educational attainment was sacrosanct in the formula for success. The collection of historically Black colleges located in Atlanta is known as the Atlanta University Center Consortium (A.U.C.). It is known as the world's largest conglomerate of African American private institutions of higher education. The schools of the A.U.C. include Clark-Atlanta (1865) —initially two separate colleges that joined forces: Atlanta University (1865) and Clark College (1869), Spelman College (1881), Morehouse College (1867), Interdenominational Theological Center (1958), and Morehouse School of Medicine (1975) (Atlanta University Center, 2018). In addition to the A.U.C., Atlanta is also home to research I institutions Georgia Institute of Technology, Georgia State University, and Emory University. These universities are historically White but have all been integrated since 1962. This list is not

exhaustive. There are many other notable institutions in the city. These institutions all serve as attractants for Black people in search of social mobility. The A.U.C. long-established Atlanta as one of the historical centers for Black intellectualism and empowerment (Atlanta University Center, 2018). Georgia Institute of Technology consistently reports that it ranks as one of the top five institutions in the nation to graduate the most Black engineers at all degree levels (Grovenstein, 2004). Georgia State University is comprised of a predominately Black student body and graduates more Black students than any other university in the nation (Fausset, 2018). The graduates of the A.U.C., Georgia Institute of Technology, Georgia State University, Emory University, and other colleges located in the city supply Atlanta with a consistent pool of Black talent who are able to supply the many industries that exist in the city. These graduates also aid with expanding Atlanta's Black middle class.

The working class or poor, those who did not occupy the class status synonymous with success, have been historically excluded from the quest for higher education. Often preoccupied with the day-to-day concerns of survival, factors of social mobility are often elusive. A 2015 Report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation detailed the conditions of the poor and working-class Blacks in Atlanta. While many grave realities were illustrated, the educational outcomes of the working class and poor provide some context to understand the factors that contribute to stagnating class mobility for many working-class and poor African Americans. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2015) reports:

> The 2014 graduation rate for White and Asian students was 84 percent and 94 percent, respectively, compared with 57 percent for Black students and 53 percent for Latino students. Black and Latino students are three times more likely to drop out of school…Comparisons between Atlanta students and their peers across the state further

> illuminate the distinct barriers facing African American children: While …White students graduate at a higher rate across the state, its African American students lag behind their peers outside the city. (p. 9)

Access to quality education and K-12 achievement are precursors for accessing higher education and success later in life. When Black students continually negotiate barriers that prevent them from reaching critical K-12 milestones, it is more likely that they will be excluded from class mobility opportunities later in life. The education outcomes of Atlanta's K-12 population are just one of the factors that could place them in a disadvantageous position in comparison to transplants to take advantage of the Mecca's opportunities.

Income Opportunity and Black Transplants

Atlanta has a long history of appealing to Blacks from other cities and states. However, the economic opportunities and social resources that attracted migrants were not as easily accessible to natives of the city. The inequity of access eventually resulted in class divides. In 2020, Atlanta was a "city full of enterprising transplants," per a report done by Bloomberg Business Weekly (Sasso, Matthews, & Newkirk, 2019). Non-native Atlantans are drawn to the city because of the vibrant entertainment industry, colleges, and career opportunities (Guynn & Ellis, 2019; Hobson, 2018; Sasso, Matthews, & Newkirk, 2019). Those who come for college often stay after graduation because of the abundance of opportunities available to people with degrees. Black migrants come to Atlanta from places with higher living costs, such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Jobs for qualified people are plentiful, and housing is affordable compared to other metropolises. In addition to this, Atlanta offers a distinct and vibrant Black culture, undergirded by the graduates of the A.U.C. and the Black artists who make the Black entertainment industry vibrant (Sasso, Matthews, & Newkirk, 2019). The job offerings in Atlanta

can be manifold for those positioned for it. Technology is one of the most recent occupation fields to take root in the city. Cities historically known for their technological occupations do not offer the diversity that is available in Atlanta. In addition, Atlanta offers "a rich history of entrepreneurship, a booming Black middle class, [and an] affordable quality of life" (Guynn & Ellis, 2019). Much of this can be attributed to the Black leadership within the city who worked to create business opportunities for middle and elite Blacks and Whites. Critics of the city's political leaders state that leadership has overly focused on increasing industry and attracting middle-class professionals and has failed to close the immense income/job inequality gap (Sasso, Matthews, & Newkirk, 2019; Stokes, 2018).

Atlanta emerged as the Black Mecca in the 1970s. This was primarily because the city presented unique economic opportunities for African Americans. Since the 1970s, the city has consistently illustrated that success was very likely for Blacks who migrated into the city. As Blacks achieved, clear class definitions emerged. Political involvement and leadership, educational attainment, and income opportunity define class status in Atlanta. Unfortunately, equality of access has yet to be fully realized. African Americans who are natives of Atlanta do not have the same access to resources or opportunities. Most natives experience stagnant social mobility. Their class and political interests also do not align with the interests of the city's leadership. Historically, when middle-class and elite Blacks present their interests to political leaders, they receive responses and solutions because their interests align with the Mecca's image. Lower-class and poor Black political interests do not. This creates a class divide in the city's Black population. Despite these challenges, the city still hosts a sizeable core Black middle class.

Summary

Black achievement and social mobility are complex. Erecting from the dismal space of enslavement, this topic has become one that scholars frequent. One of the fascinating aspects of this phenomenon is that it has developed in ways different than mainstream notions and values regarding upward mobility and success have not. Free Blacks during the antebellum period were the first of the race to inform notions of class status. From emancipation through the Reconstruction Era—1865 -1890, African Americans could engage in professional banking spaces, participate in the spirit of enterprise, and engage in higher education more easily. Striving for a reality more promising than the racial violence that followed emancipation, African Americans eventually migrated to leave the racially and economically stagnant South. The legal, education, and economic advances from 1945-1970 increased the size of the Black middle class and changed the possibilities for upward mobility. Between 1990-2016 the Black middle class stabilized, and public and political notoriety and integration increased. This era also emphasized the need to continue focusing on social justice and equity issues. During this time, America witnessed the two-time election of the first Black president, the formation of a core Black middle class, and the founding of new Black political and social justice organizations. The events in each area shape how Black Americans conceptualize success, leverage education, and prioritize social justice and equity issues.

While nuanced and multifaceted, Black achievement and upward mobility are identifiable phenomena. New research must carefully frame the conversation with the correct sociohistorical understandings of how upward mobility occurs within the Black community. Scholarly discussions of the Black middle class must critically define what middle class means. Educational attainment, homeownership, and neighborhood locations are all distinctly different,

beginning around an income of $50,000. Improper definitions result in conflations that do not progress understandings of the Black middle class. Though difficult sociohistorical contexts still persist, a demographic of the Black population now exhibits a blue-chip middle-class status.

The next chapter will discuss the methods used to conduct this mixed-method inquiry. A discussion of the research context, participants, data methods and collection, procedures, and analysis will be presented.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Overview Of Study

E. Franklin Frazier and Carter G. Woodson contended that Black people who experienced class or social mobility should leverage privileges associated with their class status to foster systemic social and political that would positively impact the Black masses. Both sociologists heavily critiqued highly-educated or middle-class Black people who abandoned Black cultural traditions, identities, and sociopolitical issues. Woodson and Frazier's concerns were precursory critiques of meritocratic discourses. Meritocratic discourses populate the social imaginary with claims about the nature of American achievement and upward mobility that disregard America's sociopolitical and historical realities. The foundational premise of meritocracy is that one's only hard work/effort and intellectual ability inform social mobility chances and access to opportunity. Systemic oppression and barriers that disenfranchise people, especially historically marginalized populations, from full participation in economic, political, and social opportunities are ignored. Woodson and Frazier both knew that no amount of hard work or intelligence could meaningfully counter the social, legal, and political marginalization of Black people, which were foundational components of American structure. Although intelligence and hard work are necessary, intentional preparation and effort must be dedicated to dismantling Black subjugation.

Since Frazier and Woodson's writings, the political, legal, and social landscape has significantly shifted how racialization occurs and how upward mobility is experienced. The number of Black people who experience some level of class privileged in comparison to their working class and less formally educated counterparts has also expanded. One of the new challenges that these realities present researchers with is understanding diverse Black experiences within the context of new racial projects. Atlanta, Georgia is an ideal location to

study the complexities that have come to exist within the Black middle class because it has historically attracted Blacks in search of upward mobility. The seeming multitude of upward mobility possibilities and social spaces that afford Black people the ability to be creators and consumers of Black culture has earned the city the moniker "The Black Mecca" or "The New Black Mecca" (Stafford, 2010; Whitaker, 2002; Hobson, 2018). While the city does host a sizeable and diverse Black middle class, research shows that the fallacies of merit-based social mobility also plague Atlanta.

In alignment with critical race theory, the methodological design of this study carried out four purposes. First, it centered the voices of Atlanta's core Black middle class in defining and conceptualizing success. Secondly, the data gathered captured core Black middle-class cultural understandings and values to examine if and how the group's equity and social justice priorities impact social mobility goals and middle-class lifestyle choices. The third purpose accomplished in this study was the development of a conceptual framework of upward mobility and equity values from core middle-class Black people that afforded the opportunity to interrogate educational achievement values, upward mobility experiences, and class values. The fourth purpose achieved during this inquiry was comparing and contrasting contemporary and historical education, social equity, and class values to identify differences and alignment. This study is significant because it: 1) centers the voices of the core Black middle class to expand extant success and achievement literature that seeks to further understandings about the Black middle class and corresponding ideologies; 2) it is an investigation of the intersection of social mobility experiences, social equity priorities, and class values in a seemingly privileged demographic and produced findings that complicate meritocratic ideologies arms education policymakers and social reformers with more accurate accounts of achievement; 3) highlights the effectiveness of

concept mapping in amplifying the values and priorities of populations whose voices are often marginalized; 5) is a contemporary example of honoring scholar-ancestors and familial ancestors by continuing the work of racial uplift and recording accurate Black histories. The research questions of this study are:

1) What are the success narratives of Atlanta's core Black middle class, that is, how do members account for 'success,' however it is defined?
2) What are the values and motivations that shape how this class conceives or understands success and how do these relate to various cultural practices?
3) If distinct success ideologies can be delineated, how does each relate to equity and social justice concerns?
4) What role, if any, has education played in the success narratives and values of this class?

An integrated mixed-method design was used to develop concept maps and gather phenomenological interviews to answer the research questions. In the following discussion, the setting, and methodological design of the study are described. This chapter's discussion details data collection methods, sampling and criteria, data collection and analysis, external and internal validity, and limitations.

Setting

Atlanta, Georgia is a southern city that is historically known to attract Blacks seeking to take advantage of economic, political, and social opportunities. Since the 1970s the city has been colloquially referred to as the Black Mecca (Fausset, 2018; Guynn & Ellis, 2019; Hobson, 2017; Sasso, Matthews, & Newkirk, 2019). The U.S. Census reports that the 2019 population of Atlanta was 506,804. This population size reflected a 2% increase from the previous year. The median household income in 2019 was $66,657—reflecting a 2% increase from the previous

year. The median age was 33. In 2018, Atlanta's household income was more than the annual median income across the United States. The five largest ethnic groups are Black or African American (Non-Hispanic)- 49%, White (Non-Hispanic)- 39%, Asian (Non-Hispanic)- 5%, and White (Hispanic) – 3%. The median property value in Atlanta was $359,500, and the homeownership rate was 47% (Census Bureau, 2018).

The largest industries in Atlanta, Georgia are Professional, Scientific, Technical Services, Educational Services, and Health Care and Social Assistance. The highest-paying industries are Information, Finance, Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services. The highest-paid ethnicity in the city is Asian, with an average salary of $65,727. Caucasian people are the second highest paid. Of common jobs, management and enterprising careers are the highest paying. Within this industry Black people in full-time positions have an average income of $68,399, Whites have an average full-time salary of $104, 571, and Asians have an average full-time salary of $97,112. The income findings are complicated by the fact that the majority of the degrees awarded in the city are to Black or African American students (37%) (Fauset, 2018; U.S.A. Data, 2019). White (35%) and Asian (14%) students are awarded degrees at lower percentages than Black students. Atlanta is also the home of the largest conglomerate of African American private institutions of higher education—the A.U.C. (Atlanta University Center Consortium, 2018).

The poverty distribution of Atlanta further complicates the Black Mecca image. Of those living below the poverty line, 74% are Black. While the city has a long history of political leadership by Black people (Hobson, 2017), the racial progress of the city indicates that hard work and intelligence do not fully inform if Black people will experience success. Data collected and analyzed from U.S. demographic data collected from the year 2000 census by the

Social Science Data Analysis Network shows that Atlanta's neighborhoods are extremely segregated. Whites live in neighborhoods where they are less likely to be exposed to any race beyond White. In addition to this, the racial composition does not reflect the demographic composition of the city. Most races, with the exception of Blacks, live in a neighborhood with more exposure to Whites than their own race. Blacks live in neighborhoods that are predominately Black and are less diverse than the neighborhoods of their racial counterparts. The White/Black dissimilarity index of Atlanta is 83.5. The U.S. Census Bureau describes the dissimilarity index as "the percentage of a group's population that would have to change residence for each neighborhood to have the same percentage of that group as the metropolitan area overall." The chart below displays the exposure indices by racial group.

Table 1: Racial Exposure Indices Based on Census Year 2000

White	White	Black	American Indian	Asian	Native Hawaiian	Other	Mixed	Hispanic	Total
White	77.9%	12.5%	3.2%	3.2%	0.0%	0.2%	1.1%	4.9%	100.0%
Black	26.0%	64.4%	0.2%	2.3%	0.0%	0.2%	1.4%	5.6%	100.0%
Asian	57.8%	20.2%	0.2%	9.5%	0.1%	0.3%	1.7%	10.3%	100.0%
American Indian	62.3%	25.8%	0.4%	3.0%	0.0%	0.2%	1.3%	6.9%	100.0%
Hispanic	45.2%	24.4%	0.2%	5.2%	0.1%	0.3%	1.6%	23.2%	100.0%
Total Population Exposure	59.8%	28.7%	0.2%	3.3%	0.0%	0.2%	1.3%	6.5%	100.0%

These numbers indicate that Black residents in Atlanta may have distinctly different experiences than their counterparts regarding the job market, lifestyle, and class positioning. It also calls the Mecca image into question. Blacks are disproportionately represented in poverty statistics and underrepresented in high-income careers. Black underrepresentation in high-income fields is questionably inversely related to the number of Black people who earn degrees in the city.

Despite the disparate income distribution, Atlanta is an epicenter of Black cultural aesthetics. In 1974 Mayor Maynard Jackson created the Bureau of Cultural Affairs. While the

expressed goal of the bureau was to make all forms of art more accessible to all citizens, the Black population was largely the focus of the bureau's initiatives. As a result of the bureau, "Atlanta morphed into a center of art and culture for the [B]lack world" (Hobson, 2017, p. 205). Within the artistic expression of the city, there is celebration of the Mecca image and criticism for the way in which its Black citizens who do not fit neatly into the city's image have not been empowered politically, economically, or socially. Artists have historically used their platform to discuss how the city has abandoned political and social policies that would create equity in the pursuit of political and economic agendas that increased its "global respect and commercial success" (Hobson, 2017, p. 205). Despite the negligence of certain Black populations, the city remains an epicenter of Black cultural expression and consumption.

The racial, economic, educational, and cultural profile situate Atlanta as a prime location to investigate how core Black middle-class people define and conceptualize success. While a sizeable middle class does exist, the city's history, racial segregation, and income distribution indicate that merit-based mobility may not frame the success narratives and success conceptualizations of core middle-class Black people. In addition to this, a city that hosts such a large impoverished Black population and has a history of marginalizing Black interests (Hobson, 2017) is likely to contain Black populations whose values reflect sociopolitical concerns. Lastly, the large population of Blacks who have completed degrees in higher education suggests that there may be complex ideologies about education and how it relates to conceptions regarding success. Atlanta, Georgia is a prime setting for this research inquiry for these reasons.

Data Methods

Concept Mapping

This study was a qualitative and quantitative inquiry into success ideologies,

sociopolitical and cultural values, and the role of education in core Black middle-class success narratives. Two forms of data collection were used: concept mapping and five semi-structured phenomenological interviews. Both forms of data were selected because the theoretical orientation of this study, CRT prioritizes and necessitates the centering of participant voices and experiential knowledge. Concept mapping is "rooted in the tradition of community-based participatory research…[and] seeks and embraces the knowledge, expressions of need, and opinions of those who are most related to or affected by an issue (Kane & Rosas, 2018, p. 9). This data method is utilized to understand the meanings and values of complex constructs (Robinson & Trochim, 2007). Concept mapping centers the participants' voices by asking what they think in the brainstorming phase, how they think about the issue in the sorting phase, and the values a participant has by asking them to provide rankings (Kane & Rosas, 2018). In the late 1980s, William Trochim, a professor at Cornell University, developed concept mapping as a research method and the Concept Systems Global Max software that is often used to collect, manage, and analyze concept mapping data. Trochim's intent was to create a rigorous approach that articulated the differences and commonalities among people with a shared experience or problem (Kane & Rosas, 2018; Trochim, 1989, p. 2). A concept map "is a pictorial representation of [a] group's thinking which displays all of the ideas of the group relative to the topic at hand, shows how ideas are related to each other, and optionally, shows which ideas are more relevant, important, and appropriate" (Trochim, 1989, p. 2). It has been used in the fields of public health and health policy, mental health and social work, social and behavioral dynamics, business, and education (Kane & Rosas, 2018).

Concepts mapping was ideal for this study because one of the critical purposes was to identify meanings of success and values regarding education and sociopolitical issues. Concept

mapping enables the researcher to see "meaning, as well as the connections that participants discuss across concepts or bodies of knowledge…the maps support researchers in their attempts to make sure that qualitative data is embedded in a particular context" (Daley, 2004, p. 1). In addition to providing a visual of the themes, meanings, and relationships between concepts, concept mapping also increased the internal validity of the study by aiding with data triangulation and participant reflexivity. Concepts maps are a product of research software that utilizes algorithms to identify themes, meanings, and related concepts. The process affords the opportunity for researchers to make their data collection and analysis transparent, as it is a structured process that does not vary in its implementation (Daley, 2004). During concept mapping, participants review the pictorial products of the statistical analysis to shape the structuring of conceptual ideas and to interpret the meaning of the concepts that emerge.

Concept mapping has three specific phases. Phase one is development of the research focus and sample selection. Phase two is idea generation and structuring of those ideas. Phase two has four steps: brainstorming ideas, list editing, sorting of ideas, and ranking/value indicating of ideas. Phase three is analysis and interpretation (Robinson & Trochim, 2007, p. 525). In a 2007 study that investigated the barriers to minority participation in medical research the topic prompt created in phase one was "one specific barrier to racial/ethnic minority participation in medical research is_____" (Robinson & Trochim, 2007, p. 526). In another study, the prompt "a thing that causes African Americans to get sick more and die sooner is_____" was used to prompt participants to brainstorm (Kane & Rosas, 2018, p. 25). In the brainstorming—phase two of the process—participants think of short phrases or sentences that complete the prompt or that they believe are fundamentally connected to the prompt. In the 2007 study by Robinson and Trochim, participants responded to the research prompt by inputting

their short phrases/sentences into a password-protected private web page or completing a manual form that could be mailed to the researchers. The brainstorming session in the 2007 study resulted in 149 initial statements that researchers edited for clarity and duplicates. The final list included 70 statements. Some of the statements submitted were: "literacy issues; lack of concern; lack of cultural sensitivity in communications and approaches; and fear of being a guinea pig" (p. 528). Participants using either the private web log-on or the manual-sorting packet sorted the list of 70 statements. The rules of sorting in concept mapping are 1) participants sort the statements in a way that makes the most sense to them, 2) each statement cannot be placed in its own pile, 3) there cannot be one pile, and 4) it is permissible to place an item that does not fit into other piles into its own separate pile (Daley, 2004; Kane & Rosas, 2018; Robinson & Trochim, 2007; Trochim, 1989). Researchers sometimes use group meetings, individual meetings, or virtual webinars to explain the processes of sorting within the software or using the manual packet use, so that phase two is completed correctly. The meetings also provide a chance for participants to ask questions about the process (Kane & Rosas, 2018).

The final step of phase two is ranking/value indicating. Researchers commonly use a questionnaire format to present statements for ranking (Kane & Rosas, 2018; Robinson & Trochim, 2007). In the 2007 study by Robinson and Trochim, participants were instructed to rate each statement based on how important each issue was in preventing the members of the racial/ethnic population they worked with from participating in medical research. The rating scale was: 1 relatively unimportant (when compared with the other statements); 2 somewhat important; 3 moderately important; 4 very important, and 5 extremely important. In another study conducted in 2016, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation had participants rank statements generated about creating a culture of health using the following instructions:

"On a scale of 1 to 4, please rate how relatively important you think each idea is to supporting a culture of health: 1 relatively unimportant; 2 slightly important; 3 moderately important; 4 very/ extremely important" (Kane & Rosas, 2018, p. 36). In each study, data were averaged across individuals to provide an average relative importance rating for each statement.

Following the rating phase, the qualitative data from participants—"what they know or express, how they think about the ideas…and what they value" (Kane & Rosas, 2018, p. 42) is converted into quantitative data. This is done using statistical analysis software to conduct multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis. Many projects that use concept map data manage their studies with the Concept Systems Global Max software because it was designed specifically for concept map data analysis. Concept Systems Global Max assists the researcher with completing all steps in the process (Kane & Rosas, 2018; Trochim, 1989). The result of analysis is the creation of a number of concept maps. A point map is created to display a two-dimensional picture of the statements. This map shows statements piled together most often in close proximity and those piled together less frequently located further apart (Robinson & Trochim, 2007; Trochim, 1989). A cluster map shows how the cluster analysis grouped the statement points on a map. A point-rating map shows the average rating for each statement on the point map. A cluster-rating map also shows each cluster's averages (Trochim, 1989, p. 9). In addition to the maps, the statistical analysis produces several results that illustrate the correlation of ideas and clusters via Pearson *r* scores and creates reports that illustrate the ideas that are collectively most salient to the topic inquiry based on participant responses. The analysis results assist the participants and the researchers with interpreting the maps to glean the meanings and label the emerging themes. During interpretation and analysis, conclusions about the causes of the relationships between clusters are made. Clusters are also given names, and clusters that can

be logically grouped into larger clusters are collapsed. The final map with collapsed clusters and names represents the conceptual framework of the topic. Concept Systems Global Max enables the researcher to display maps in a number of visualizations to aid with the use of the maps in answering research questions.

Phenomenological Interviews

Semi-structured phenomenological interviews were leveraged to explain how the meanings and values that emerged in concept mapping came to exist. The interviews provided social and cultural context, essential factors to consider to meet the study's goals. A phenomenological interview is a qualitative data method. Qualitative research seeks to "describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning…of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomenon in the social world…qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed…of their world and the experiences they have in the world." More specifically, phenomenological interviewing endeavors to "turn toward phenomenon which [have] been blocked from sight by the theoretical patterns in front of them" (Merriam, 2009, p. 26). Phenomenological interviewing allows researchers to better understand what it is like for a person to experience a phenomenon. It also leverages the experiential knowledge of participants to shed light on the meanings associated with an experience (Merriam, 2009; Roulston, 2010). While concept maps displayed meanings, values, and the relationships between emergent concepts, it was vital to collect narratives for a deeper understanding of the meanings and values that emerged. Phenomenological interviews provided this insight.

Sampling and Criteria

Sixteen participants were purposefully recruited to participate in concept-mapping data collection. Five of the concept-mapping participants were purposefully recruited to provide a

semi-structured interview.

Sample

There were five requirements to participate in this study: 1) self-identify as African American or Black; 2) earn between $50,000 to $100,000 annually; 3) have earned a minimum of bachelor's degree; 4) have lived in Atlanta, Georgia for five consecutive years; and 5) be between the ages of 25-55 years old. These parameters were used because the study sought to examine the core Black middle class. Past studies of the Black middle class have argued and demonstrated the need to differentiate between the working/lower, middle/core, and upper/elite middle-class experiences (Claytor, 2020; Lacy, 2007; Landry & Marsh, 2011; Thomas, 2015). The core Black middle-class income range has been established as $50k - $100k (Lacy, 2007; Claytor, 2020).

Class status extends beyond a person's income and includes lifestyle choices, worldviews, values, and consumptive choices. Consumption includes everything people buy, engage in for entertainment, and indulge in for pleasure. The level of education earned is a more important indicator of cultural proclivities than income alone. College education also significantly changes the quality of life options and socializes cultural tastes (Claytor, 2020, p. 24). To increase the opportunity to recruit individuals with a middle-class identity, participants were required to have obtained a minimum of a bachelor's degree; individuals who had earned advanced degrees were not restricted from participation.

Atlanta is home to many non-natives, as the city has a history of attracting people seeking opportunities (Hobson, 2017; Sasso, Matthews, & Newkirk, 2019; Stokes, 2018). According to state tax law, people become full residents after living in the city for at least one year (Kurt, 2021). The state tax law measure of residency provided a standardized measure to indicate

residency; however, this study also aimed to capture Atlanta-specific Black cultural beliefs and practices. Although residency is established legally at one year, participants must have lived in the city for five consecutive years to increase the likelihood that they had become familiar with and acculturated to Atlanta. The final sample included a diverse group of people who had lived in the city for varying lengths of time. Finally, the age parameters were established to target generations who have been able to most benefit from civil rights legislations of the 1960s and 1970s (Claytor, 2020; Lacy, 2007; Pattillo-McCoy, 2000) and are within their peak earning years (Rae, 2020). These participant requirements allowed the chance to collect data from the core Black middle class and answer the study's research questions.

Recruitment

Sixteen people were purposefully recruited for concept mapping. One person was not able to continue beyond the brainstorming activity, resulting in a final group of fifteen participants. While concept mapping can be done with larger groups, the literature on the method states that groups of ten to twenty are adequate to produce informative maps that capture the group's conceptualizations (Trochim, 1998). Five people were purposefully recruited from the concept map participants to provide phenomenological interviews. The sample size was intentionally established to conduct an in-depth analysis and to ensure data manageability (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Participants were purposefully selected to capture diverse perspectives and success narratives. Purposeful sampling also resulted in statement generation, sorting, and ranking reflecting a myriad of perspectives within the target population.

Recruitment Procedures

Recruitment efforts targeted professional organizations, institutions of higher education, religious institutions, community mentorship programs, alumni associations, sororities and

fraternities, social events that target professionals, and social media accounts that cater to Black professionals. The recruitment procedures aimed to identify a sample that was diverse with regard to the length of residency, degrees earned, income level, age, and career and professional experiences.

The recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) was designed to increase the likelihood that interested parties would respond by asking participants if they aligned with an identity of being "Black, educated, and bougie?" and inviting individuals to participate in a study focused on that group of people. The flyer also explained the purpose of the study, the study description, and outlined eligibility requirements. The study's description section of the flyer explained that each person selected for the study would be asked to participate in three to four activities that could take one to two hours to complete. In addition, it was explained that the study would take place over six weeks. Lastly, the flyer explained that people selected for the study would be compensated $20 for completing each activity; a total of $80 could be paid out to each person who completed the study activities.

A copy of the flyer was distributed by email to department chairs at colleges and universities. It was also disseminated to outreach personnel, community gatekeepers, or public relations contacts for associations, private clubs, community programs, religious institutions, professional events, lifestyle clubs, and Black Greek letter fraternities and sororities. In addition, the flyer was also shared through a targeted paid Facebook and Instagram advertisement. The social media advertisement campaign lasted seven days and was shown to people who lived in Atlanta proper zip codes. In addition, the flyer was shared with Facebook interest groups whose target audience was likely to fit the study criteria. To decrease barriers to expressing interest in the study, flyers contained a Q.R. code that linked interested parties to a Microsoft web form to

sign up for the study (See Appendix B). Flyers also provided an URL that participants could type directly into a web browser or click to access the Microsoft web form. The web form served as the initial screening tool to recruit a diverse sample; it contained eleven demographic questions. Upon completing the web form, participants provided their name, zip code, income range, level of education, years of Atlanta residency, and gender. The web form reiterated the number of activities that participation could include and the time commitment of each activity. Finally, the web form asked each interested party if they were also interested in providing a semi-structured interview after completing the concept mapping activities.

Participant Selection & Orientation

Recruitment efforts netted 78 initial responses. Recruitment data was sorted and filtered using an excel spreadsheet to remove individuals who did not meet the study requirements. This resulted in a list of 43 eligible individuals. That list was carefully reviewed to select a final list of 25 individuals that were a diverse selection of study parameters. Official invites to participate were sent in batches by email, beginning with a group of sixteen invites (see Appendix C). Based on email responses to invitations, new participants were selected from the final list of 25 to extend new invites based on study needs. After the initial list of 25 was exhausted, the web-form entries were reviewed to identify and invite males who had expressed interest in the study and met the study requirements but lived in zip codes within metro Atlanta to increase the representation of male perspectives in the study group. The official invitation letters emailed detailed each study activity and explained what tasks would be required of each activity. The letter also explained the time commitment, how compensation would be delivered for completing each activity, and explained that onboarding orientation would be scheduled if they agreed to proceed with participation.

Twenty orientation sessions were conducted based on the availability of interested study participants. Orientation sessions lasted between 10 to 30 minutes. Study orientation sessions were conducted via the Zoom platform and required participants to have their cameras on during onboarding. This was done to verify that participants matched observable demographics input into the web form. During the onboarding, an eight-slide deck resource packet (see Appendix D) was presented to participants. The resource packet contained researcher contact information, study activity descriptions, a tentative study timeline, and video tutorial links to guide through software use and activity completion. During the orientation, it was explained that all participants would complete the first two activities and that a portion of participants, based on study needs, would be invited to complete study activities three and four. Questions posed by participants during the orientation sessions were answered and encouraged. Upon orientation completion, emails containing the resource packet were sent to those who affirmed they wanted to continue with the study. Participants who were not selected for the study were also sent an email informing them of the decision not to move forward with their study participation.

Data Collection and Analysis

Sixteen participants (n=16) were enrolled in the study and given log-in credentials to access the concept mapping software. One person was not able to continue with the study beyond the first activity, making the final group of participants fifteen (n=15). Five (n=5) people were recruited from the concept-mapping group to provide a 90-minute semi-structured interview. Concept mapping data was collected first. The themes and relationships between concepts that emerged from concept mapping were used to shape the questions that guided phenomenological interviewing, probing for depth, and data triangulation.

Data Collection

Consent Forms

Participants were provided separate informed consent documents for concept map participation and interview participation (see Appendixes E & F). Consent documents explained the nature and focus of the study. Concept mapping consent forms provided an overview of the process of concept mapping; they also reiterated the time commitment necessary. The semi-structured phenomenological interview informed consent document provided an overview of interview topics and explained that interviews would take approximately 90 minutes. The document also explained that follow-up interviews might be necessary in some instances to gain clarity and explore topics with greater depth. In addition, the interview consent document explained that interviews would be recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Consent documents also listed the potential benefits and risks of participation and described the processes for securing data and protecting individual privacy. Concept map consent documents were loaded into the data collection software and presented prior to participants being able to proceed forward with study participation. Participants agreed to proceed by clicking an "I Agree" button presented at the bottom of the consent document. Interview consent procedures included presenting the consent document on-screen during the Zoom call prior to beginning the interview. The document was read aloud by the researcher. Participants agreed to continue participation by remaining on the Zoom call and stating out loud, "I agree to participate." Copies of consent documents were emailed to participants.

Concept Maps

Log-in credentials were provided for concept mapping via email. The researcher created temporary passwords; participants were prompted to create a new password upon first log-in.

Concept mapping data was completed in six steps: 1) preparation, 2) generation of statements (brainstorming), 3) structuring of statements (sorting and ranking), 4) representation of statements, 5) interpretation of maps, and 6) map utilization.

Preparation

In the preparation step, the research prompt: *"social equity and education are important to Black upward mobility and success because"* was created and input in the data collection software. The topic statement was designed to be specific to the topic of study but broad enough to elicit a myriad of responses from participants. Two rating/ranking criteria were also created. The first ranking/rating statement was: *"how much does this statement matter to overall Black achievement?"* The second ranking/rating statement was: *"How much does this statement matter to creating an equitable society for Black people?"* Although the data collection software contains basic instructions for completing the activities, more detailed instructions were added for each activity. See Appendix G to view the instructions shared with participants for the brainstorming and sorting and ranking activities.

Brainstorming

To complete the brainstorming activity, participants were emailed a notice that the activity was open. The email also included a link to the activity (see Appendix G). The email explained that the activity would be open for one week. Participants did not have to complete the activity in one sitting. Answers were saved each time they submitted a statement/idea. Each participant was encouraged to generate 10 to 20 statements. Once logged into the data collection software, a short tutorial video was automatically shown that illustrated how to navigate the page to complete the brainstorming activity. While completing the activity, the topic prompt and activity instructions were displayed at the top of the screen so that participants could access them

as needed. See Appendix G to view specific instructions shared during the activity. Participants were instructed to type and submit each idea individually, taking care to separate each idea into its own short phrase or sentence. Once done with submitting ideas, participants clicked a button indicating that they were finished. Participants with partially finished or who had not started were sent an email and text message reminders on day four of the activity. A final text message reminder was sent to people who had not finished or started 24 hours prior to the close of the activity. Upon the close of the brainstorming activity, all submissions were reviewed to:

1) Separate statements that contained multiple ideas into separate statements reflecting a single idea
2) Edit for clarity and to write statements in a format appropriate for the rating/ranking activity
3) Remove duplicate ideas

The original list of 193 statements was expanded to a list of 215 statements in the first review. The second review resulted in a list of 152 statements. The final review resulted in 108 statements.

Sorting & Ranking (Value Rating)

To complete the sorting and ranking activity, an email containing a link to access the activity was sent. The email explained that the activity would be open for two weeks. The email also included links to tutorial videos that explained how to complete the activity (See Appendix H). Upon logging in, participants were automatically shown a tutorial video that explained the instructions to complete the activity and navigation prompts. Participants were instructed to organize/sort the statements in a way that was meaningful to them. In this activity, participants were provided with the list of 108 statements. They placed statements in groups in the manner

that made the most sense to them. Statements that did not seem to fit with any particular group were placed in a group of its own. Participants were instructed not to create a group of "misfits" or unique statements. Lastly, participants could not make a single group for all statements. Once all statements were organized, participants named each group of statements in a way that either described the group of statements or described how the participant thought about the collection of ideas.

To rank the ideas, participants navigated to a separate page within the software. Upon first access to the software, a tutorial video was shown to explain how to complete the activity. An information icon was also constantly displayed at the top of the activity screen so that participants could access it as needed. Instructions for completing the activity and the rating criteria were displayed at the top of the activity screen. Participants did not have to complete the activity in one sitting, as their progress was saved after each value rating was input. Statements were displayed in a survey format. Value ratings were indicated on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 indicating the maximum. Each ranking criteria question was housed on a separate page with the 108 statements listed in survey format so that participants could input their value ratings related to that rating criterion for all 108 statements. Activity progress was monitored through administrative tools housed in the software accessible to the researcher. Reminder text messages were sent to participants who had not started one week into the activity. Final reminder text messages were sent to participants to finish the activity 72 hours prior to the close of the activity. Each participant's submission of ratings was reviewed to ensure that value ratings were input for each rating criterion for all 108 statements. Once submissions were submitted accurately, they were "approved" by the researcher in the software system. Once a submission was approved, participants could no longer access the ranking activity.

Representation of Statements

The next step in the concept map data collection invited a smaller group of eight people from the larger group of concept mapping participations to a virtual focus group. Eight participants (n=8) were invited by email (see Appendix I) to participate in the virtual focus group. Participants were selected to reflect a variety of perspectives based on gender, degree level, length of residency, and income range. The focus group was held one week after the completion of the sorting and ranking activity. The 120-minute focus group was held to determine the best arrangement of clusters of ideas and to select labels from each cluster of ideas based on the individual suggestions input during the sorting activity. To produce the cluster maps, brainstorming, sorting, and ranking data were analyzed using Concept Systems Global Max. The specific analyses that were conducted are described in the analysis section that follows this discussion. Once the analysis was completed, a final cluster map was produced with two separate displays. One map displayed the clusters with upward mobility value ratings reflected; the second map displayed social equity values.

The focus group began with the researcher stating the conversation's focus and fielding participants' questions about the process. Participants were then shown the point map to observe how ideas had been sorted. Those sorted together most frequently appeared closer to each other than those the group had less frequently sorted together. Ideas that had not been sorted together were located in different areas of the map near other similarly sorted ideas. See Appendix P to view the point-rating map. The point-rating map aided the focus group in selecting a cluster solution that would represent the conceptual map for the group's thinking. The concept mapping software generated the first cluster solution. It showed a solution of eight clusters. The focus group considered several clusters solutions ranging from 8 to 25. A final cluster solution of 20

clusters was selected. The focus group believed that this arrangement of ideas reflected an accurate depiction of the point rating arrangement of points and also the group's way of thinking about the concepts. After selecting a cluster solution, the group examined the list of cluster names suggested by Concept Systems Global Max software. To select a final name for the cluster, the list of ideas that were included in each cluster was considered in conjunction with the names that had been suggested. In most instances, a name was selected from the suggestions. In three instances, the group decided to create a new label that was not on the list of suggestions.

In the final 30 minutes of the focus group, two additional analysis reports were examined to aid with shaping the questions that would guide interviews. First, the focus group examined "go-zones." This report compared statement values for each variable (equity and upward mobility). Participants provided thought-provoking and critical perspectives about why a statement had received a certain value ranking in either area. Intentional focus and conversation were dedicated to statements/ideas that were high in value for upward mobility or low in value for social justice/equity and vice versa. See Appendix O to view the "go-zone" report. The last report viewed was called "spanning analysis." This report illustrated the relationships between clusters and statements on the conceptual map by displaying lines of connection and a statistical measure that provided insight into the strength of the relationship. The focus group was not recorded; however, extensive field notes were taken throughout the discussions. Follow-up and probing questions were asked to clarify participants' explanations and understandings. The discussions from the focus group and overall concept map findings directly informed the areas of exploration and discussion during phenomenological interviews.

Phenomenological Interviews

Five people were recruited from the group of concept map participants to provide a 90-

minute semi-structured interview. Participants were invited to interview by email (see Appendix J). Interviews took place three to seven days after the focus group was conducted. Each interview was conducted using Zoom teleconferencing software and was recorded to allow for transcription and analysis. Participants elected to interview in environments that felt most comfortable for their interview privacy needs. A twelve-question interview guide shaped each interview (see Appendix K for a full list of questions). Probing questions were asked based on responses. The interviews aimed to explore rationales for value ratings and relationships between clusters with greater depth. The interviews investigated numerous topics related to upward mobility motivations, social equity values, and the role of education with respect to experiencing upward mobility or creating a more just society. In addition, participants were asked to define success and describe times in their life they felt most successful or accomplished. Interviews also explored class values and lifestyle choices by asking about consumption choices for entertainment, business patronization choices, and actions they took in their day-to-day lives to affirm their racial identity. In the later half of the interview, participants were asked to comment on clusters that had not been discussed at length during the focus group but were high in overall value ratings for social equity and upward mobility. Those cluster topics included: 1) honoring ancestors; 2) lifting other Black people while experiencing upward mobility; and 3) how they believed Black middle-class values impacted unity between working and poor-class Black populations. Interviews ended with each person responding to the question, "What is the Black American Dream?" No follow-up interviews were necessary.

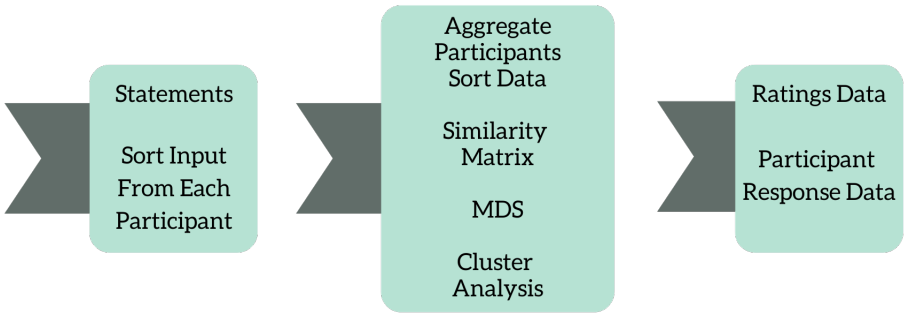
Data Analysis

Concept Map Analysis

Analysis of concept map data converts the qualitative information—"what participants

know or express, how they think about the ideas as related, and what they value or observe" — to quantitative data (Rosas & Scott, 2017, p. 42). Analysis in concept mapping is the central activity in producing results. Four data analyses were completed: 1) participant sort data were aggregated; 2) a similarity matrix was created; 3) multidimensional scaling was conducted (M.D.S.); and 4) hierarchal cluster analysis was completed. Figure 1 illustrates the steps of concept map analysis, and that analysis is central.

Figure 1: Concept Map Analysis Steps



The first analysis conducted was the similarity matrix. The similarity matrix analysis accomplished two foundational tasks: 1) it converted participants' qualitative decisions into quantitative data, and 2) it combined all of the quantitative results from every individual's sort into one single matrix (Kane & Rosas, 2017, p. 43). The matrix contained sixteen columns and sixteen rows. The process for building the similarity matrix was additive. To calculate similarity, relationships are represented as a binary—0-1. For each set of sorting data, every item was reviewed in relation to each item in a set. If a participant connected two items, a counter of 1 was input into the corresponding cell. For items that were not sorted together, the cell value remained 0. Each time two items were sorted together by a participant, the number in the corresponding cell increased by 1. For example, if all sixteen participants sorted the same two items together, the corresponding cell for those two items reflected "16." The higher the number in a cell indicated that participants had shared meanings about groups of items.

The second analysis conducted was multidimensional scaling (M.D.S.). M.D.S. was used to visualize the relationships between statements/ideas based on how frequently items were sorted together. Two dimensions were used to represent the statements and their meaning relationship. The calculations from the similarity matrix were converted into *x-y* coordinates. Each idea/statement was then plotted onto a map using these coordinates. The final result of this analysis was the plotting of each idea (represented as a numbered dot) in proximity to all ideas (108 statements) generated during brainstorming. Ideas that were sorted together most frequently were plotted in close proximity. Those sorted together less frequently or not at all were sorted with less proximity. The point map was the visual depiction of the results of M.D.S. (see Appendix P).

After M.D.S. was completed, hierarchal cluster analysis (H.C.A.) was performed. Cluster analysis takes the plotted statements and "clusters" statements to reflect similar concepts. The points on the plot map were merged with the two statistically closest points. This process continually expanded clusters by merging the two statistically closest points until a cluster was formed. H.C.A. creates "nonoverlapping, higher-order conceptual territories" (Kane & Rosas, 2017, p. 47). To ensure that the participant group agreed with the statistical grouping of their ideas, participants reviewed the cluster map in a focus group. During the focus group, eight participants utilized a tool—cluster replay map—within the Concept Systems Global Max software to consider different cluster arrangements. The goal of the focus group was to garner participant interpretation and feedback about the correct grouping of the ideas based on how they collectively made meaning out of the 108 statements. The final result of the step in the analysis was a cluster map that contained 20 conceptual territories.

Phenomenological Interviews Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded for transcription. Transcription was performed using Otter AI software by uploading the video files into the software. The audio from each video was converted into a written transcript of the interviews. Each transcript was reviewed word for word while listening to the audio file of the recorded interview to identify any errors made by the software. Once accurate transcripts were downloaded as a word document to conduct coding analysis.

Coding analysis was performed in two phases using Dedoose qualitative analysis software. The first phase of analysis endeavored to make meaning of the narrative provided by each person. Two coding methods were used in the first phase of coding. In vivo coding was the first coding analysis performed. This form of coding leaned on the interviewee's voice to lead code labels. The second method of coding used in phase one was values coding. Values coding guided the researcher in identifying data that reflected values, attitudes, and beliefs related to worldviews (Saldaña, 2016). In the second level of coding, focused, pattern, and structural coding were used. Focused coding reduced the number of codes from the first phase of coding so that data were categorized in meaningful ways. Pattern coding was then used to identify and begin the process of explaining emergent themes. Lastly, structural coding was conducted to relate data to specific research questions.

The tenets of CRT and themes from historical figures prominent in the literature discussion guided determinations about key data to label and structuring the datum into themes that informed the research inquiry. Participant experiences were carefully interrogated to gather insights about how their upward mobility trajectories complicated dominant discourses regarding success and merit-based upward mobility. Data that provided understandings of racialization

and sociohistorical influences within the interviews was intentionally sought and coded. Information highlighting contemporary education and social equity values was especially extracted to make conclusions about how they aligned with or diverged from historical sociological understandings. Concept map themes and values were also compared to interview themes to triangulate findings. Finally, data analysis summaries were shared with participants to garner feedback about the themes and explanations. This final step of analysis helped to re-center the voice, check for accuracy of interpretation, and to honor their truths in this area of research.

Internal & External Validity

The internal validity of a study informs how well the study's findings are credible and reliable (Merriam, 2009). Three methods for achieving internal validity were leveraged in this study. Triangulation requires that a researcher work to gather multiple data sources to inform the data and to view the data from various perspectives. Phenomenological interviews and concept maps were used to understand the information gathered and to ensure reliability. Respondent validation was also used to inform the credibility of the data gathered. Respondent validation was embedded in the process of concept mapping and was also utilized during the semi-structured interviews by inviting participants to provide feedback on the final analysis of the findings. I also ensured that there was adequate engagement with data. This involved collecting data until new information was no longer being discovered. Data was closely examined for variation and nuance that could inform alternate explanations for themes and findings (Merriam, 2009, pp. 217-219).

In addition to data triangulation, respondent validation, and adequate engagement with data, another point of internal validity of this study attests to the rigor and strength of the

findings: the rapport and relationships that emerged between the participants and myself. The multiple research activities of concept mapping and the participant group's size afforded the opportunity for multiple interactions with each participant. In addition, participants were personally invested in the topic of this study. Their organic interest and passion for this inquiry were demonstrated through their time commitments and earnest efforts to detail their stories, indicate their values, and impeccably illustrate their thoughts. Participants were willing to be vulnerable and share difficult experiences with upward mobility to contribute textured success narratives to supplement the values they expressed during concept mapping. The study participants were equally invested in examining the analysis results. They demonstrated this by staying closely connected after data collection was completed to check the progress and completion of the study.

External validity refers to a study's ability to be generalized beyond the setting and participants of the study. Generalization in the statistical or quantitative sense is not possible; however, qualitative studies offer the ability to learn about lived experiences. This study used thick descriptions to increase external validity. Thick description involves providing highly descriptive statements regarding the "setting, participants, findings— complete with adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from particular interviews, field notes, and documents" (Merriam, 2009, p. 227).

Limitations

The research focus and methodological design were established to gather information from participants who would likely have experiences that informed the research questions. The limitations of this study are:

- The study is place-based, focusing on Black residents of Atlanta, Georgia. Only a small

number of metro-Atlanta residents were included to ensure gender diversity.

- Interview narratives and income/salary data relied on truthful reporting and detailing from participants
- Though appropriate for accurate statistical analysis, the sample size is small compared to what is possible for concept mapping. The data gathered from this study will not be generalizable to populations with significant differences from the population targeted for this inquiry. A future implication for further research is to work with a larger sample.
- COVID-19 social distancing guidelines resulted in all interviews being conducted via a virtual platform, making it impossible to interview free of minor distractions in the home of participants.

Summary

The extant literature regarding the Black middle class has illustrated that there is considerable nuance within this class. African Americans who are core middle class have a distinct class experience that differs from the experiences of their lower or upper-middle-class counterparts. Participants were purposefully sampled to identify a diverse group of people who met the participation requirements. Sixteen people who identified as Black or African American, earned between $50k -$100k annually, had a minimum of a bachelor's degree, were between the ages of 25-55, and had lived in Atlanta for a minimum of one year were asked to participate in concept mapping. Five participants were recruited for semi-structured 90-minute interviews Participants were provided an informed consent that they verbally agreed to or clicked "I agree" before proceeding with study participation. Data from concept maps were analyzed using the Concept Systems Global Max software and participant interpretation. Interviews were transcribed for analysis purposes. CRT and historical education and class theorists informed data

analysis. Internal validity was addressed by triangulating data. External validity was attended to by providing sufficient descriptions of data gathered to make it easy for future researchers to identify individuals with similar sociohistorical contexts that the study findings may be applicable. These methods were leveraged to answer the research questions posed for this study and to conduct a rigorous social science inquiry into this topic.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to center the voices of Atlanta's core Black middle class in defining and conceptualizing success. The second purpose was to capture core Black middle-class cultural understandings and values to examine how matters of social equity and justice influence class mobility goals and lifestyle choices. The third purpose was to develop a conceptual framework of upward mobility and social equity values and gather success narratives to interrogate the interplay between educational achievement, upward mobility experiences, and class values. Finally, the fourth purpose was to juxtapose contemporary education, social equity, and class values with historical Black class and education theorists to critically examine differences and alignment. This research is significant because:

1) It centers the voices of the core Black middle class to expand extant success and achievement literature that seeks to further understandings of the Black middle class and corresponding ideologies by examining an understudied nuance of the Black middle class.
2) It investigated the intersection of social mobility experiences, social equity priorities, and class values in a seemingly privileged demographic and produced findings that complicate meritocratic ideologies and arms education policymakers and social reformers with more nuanced accounts of achievement/success
3) It highlights the utility of a mixed methodological design of concept-mapping and phenomenological interviews to identify priorities and values in populations whose voices are often marginalized or silenced.
4) It is an example of honoring scholar-ancestors and familial ancestors to continue the

work of racial uplift and authentically recording Black histories.

The research questions that guided this inquiry are:

1) What are the success narratives of Atlanta's core Black middle class, that is, how do members account for 'success,' however it is defined?
2) What are the values and motivations that shape how this class conceives or understands success, and how do these relate to various cultural practices?
3) If distinct success ideologies can be delineated, how does each relate to equity and social justice concerns?
4) What role, if any, has education played in the success narratives and values of this class?

This inquiry's purpose and research questions were derived from the epistemological perspective of the critical philosophical tradition. Research developed out of critical tradition aids with describing the "essence(s) of a shared experience" and questioning larger systems of "society, culture, and the institutions that shape the experiences of the participants (Merriam, 2009, p. 35). Critical research endeavors to analyze how hegemonic processes "advance the interests of one group while oppressing those of other groups...[it also works] intimately to uncover the "nature of truth and the construction of knowledge" (Merriam, 2009, p. 35). The research design was an integrated mixed-methodology in response to this philosophical stance. Two data collection methods, group concept mapping (GCM) and semi-structured phenomenological interviews, were utilized to achieve the research goals of this inquiry.

Overview of Chapter

Chapter Four discusses the data collected from sixteen core Black middle-class people living in Atlanta, Georgia. The chapter begins with a description of the participants and their demographic characteristics. Following this discussion, the results are presented in two parts.

Synthesizing the results from concept mapping and interviews via thematic analysis, Part I is a conversation regarding insights related to each research question. The concept map of the participants' values and meanings is presented with thematic territories highlighted alongside a table that lists these concept map thematic territories matched to the corresponding thematic findings from the analysis of the interview data. Part II comprises a discussion of the concept map and the emerging values related to upward mobility, social equity, and justice. To illustrate the utility and depth of insights made possible by the methodological design of the study, there are points in the discussions in Part I and Part II of this chapter where I engage in an in-depth discussion of the statistical findings to highlight how the integration of the data methods has provided comprehensive and nuanced answers to the research questions.

The conceptual themes and values derived from concept mapping result from the integration of qualitative and quantitative data. Concept map data analysis included multidimensional scaling analysis, hierarchal cluster analysis, and focus group interpretation of concept map cluster data. Five people were selected to provide semi-structured phenomenological interviews. Interview data were transcribed using Otter AI software and analyzed using Dedoose qualitative analysis software. Two phases of coding were conducted to make meaning and identify recurrent themes in the participant interview transcripts.

Participants

The data for this study was collected from concept mapping with sixteen participants and then recruiting five participants from the larger group to provide interviews. All data was collected virtually. The participant co-constructors of this study collectively spent approximately 57 hours completing the five research activities to construct meaning, indicate values, identify concepts, and explore their perspectives of and experiences with Black middle-class culture,

social equity, education, and class mobility.

Demographics

Participants were asked to answer demographic questions to provide deeper insight into shared experiences, values, and perspectives. Information was gathered about age, gender, racial and ethnic identity, income range, marital status, degree attainment, and career level and field. People were also asked to disclose their length of Atlanta residency and where they lived prior to migrating to Atlanta. Table 2 displays a summary of the demographic findings and a comparison of the entire participant group to those selected for interviews.

Table 2: Participant Group v. Interviewee Group Demographics

Demographic Parameter	Participant Group		Interview Group	
Age				
25-33	12%	2	-	-
35-44	69%	11	100%	5
45-55	19%	3	-	-
Gender				
Men	44%	7	60%	3
Women	56%	9	40%	2
Racial Identity				
Black	88%	14	100%	5
African-American	12%	2	-	-
Ethnic Identity				
US Born Americans	86%	14	100%	5
African (Cape Verde)	7%	1	-	-
Guyanese	7%	1	-	-
Income				
$50,000 - $75,999	44%	7	60%	3
$76,000 -$99,999	31%	5	20%	1
$100,000+	25%	4	20%	1
Marital Status				
Single (Never Married)	44%	7	40%	2
Married	31%	5	40%	2
Divorced	25%	4	20%	1
Degree-Level				
Doctorate	13%	2	40%	2
Ed.S	13%	2	-	-
Master	19%	3	20%	1
Bachelor	56%	9	40%	2
Degrees Being Pursued				
People In Pursuit	31%	5	6%	1
Ph.D	13%	2	-	-
Ed.D	13%	2	-	-
Masters	6%	1	6%	1
Job Level				

Owner	6%	1	-	-
Director	31%	5	20%	1
Associate	13%	2	20%	1
Manager	25%	4	20%	1
Entry Level	25%	4	40%	2
ATLien v. Transplant				
ATLien	37%	6	40%	2
Transplant	63%	10	60%	3
Length of Residence				
Born & Raised	37%	6	40%	2
5-7 Years	13%	2	40%	2
11-13 Years	31%	5	20%	1
14 or longer	19%	3	-	-
Migrated From				
Native	37%	6	60%	3
Maryland	6%	1	-	-
Michigan	13%	2	-	-
North Carolina	13%	2	40%	2
Ohio	6%	1	-	-
Other Areas of Georgia	6%	1	-	-
South Carolina	6%	1	-	-
Tennessee	6%	1	-	-
Washington D.C.	6%	1	-	-
OTP v. ITP				
ITP	81%	13	60%	3
OTP	19%	3	40%	2

Age & Gender

Most people who participated in this study are between 35 and 44. The second largest age group is 45 to 55. Seven people who participated in the study are men; nine are women. While recruiting women who fit the study's criteria was relatively easy, finding men who matched all study criteria was more challenging.

Race & Nationality

Participants had to self-identify as Black or African American to participate in the study. A notable finding is that 12% of the study's participants explicitly identify their race as African American, while the majority (88%) racially identify as Black. Participant-specific racial identification is an important distinction because the way a person of African descent elects to identify often indicates the political and social values they are evoking as they identify (Adams, 2020). According to Adams (2020), sometimes, when Black is the preferred racial classification, it is because a Black person wants to intentionally "recognize and celebrate the race, culture, and lived experiences of people all over the world." For some American-born Blacks, the racial label Black is preferred because they are not able to trace their lineage. The term African-American also has varied use. For example, some Blacks born in other countries accept African American as their racial identification "because of its cultural and historical roots in the [B]lack experience that is specific to the United States"—they take it on because they now live in the United States (Adams, 2020). This distinction is also important for a race-focused study to acknowledge, as this conversation is a current hot topic in Black popular cultural spaces. One of the goals of this study is to amplify the participants' values and voices in every way possible. Toward this end, Black and African American are reported as separate demographics.

Participants were also asked to share their ethnic identities. Although all people reported that they were born in America, some ethnically identify with their parent's country of birth.

86% of the participants are American; 7% are Guyanese ethnic identity; and 7% are African by way of Cape Verde ethnic identity. Ethnicity was an essential demographic to capture because although there are many shared experiences for people of African ancestry throughout the diaspora, nuances in experience exist within this ethnic group. Black people born in the United States have unique experiences with systemic racism and navigating blackness within American racialization compared to immigrant Blacks. Capturing the demographic about ethnic identity adds critical insight into the perspectives, values, and cultural idiosyncrasies shared by the participants in this study. In addition, this critical detail impacts the implications of the findings.

Income & Marital Status

A standard measure of social class is income (Claytor, 2019; Lacy, 2007; Pattillo, 2007; Wilson, 1978). It is usually the first measure of class positionality. Participants who volunteered to participate in the study had to earn between $50k and $100k annually. Most participants (44%) earn between $50k and $75K, with the second largest (31%) income range being $76k to $99k. It is also important to note that some participants earn a base salary that meets the income parameters of the study; however, they commonly earn bonuses in their career fields. Their annual bonuses make their salaries more than $100K.

The marital status of participants is also an interesting finding because research focusing on the emerging Black middle class (Dickson & Marsh, 2008; Marsh et al., 2007) states that the new Black middle class is comprised more of Blacks who are single (never married) and living alone. In the study group, 44% are single; 31% are married; and 25% are divorcees.

Degree Type & Job Level

The degree type and job level were important demographics to collect because one of the study's primary goals was to examine the role of education in experiencing upward mobility.

Participants must have earned a minimum of a bachelor's degree to participate—56% have bachelor's degrees; 19% have master's degrees; 13% have an Education Specialists degree; and 13% have a Doctorate of Philosophy. A smaller portion of the participants, 31%, are also pursuing additional degrees. The degrees being pursued include Doctorate—Ph.D. (13%); Doctorate in Education—Ed.D (13%); and Master's (6%).

Most participants in the study are in leadership positions as Directors in their respective fields (31%). Their career fields include education (practitioner, administration, faculty, and policy research), finance, medical (mental and public health), human resources, social work, and construction/engineering. Many participants reported work that spans multiple fields. The career field of most participants is education—with 56% reporting that their work is in education.

ATLien vs. Transplant

The final demographic gathered explains where participants migrated to Atlanta from (transplants) or if they were natives (ATLien). Figure 2 illustrates that 63% of the participants are transplants, and 37% are natives of this city. The term ATLien describes natives as an effort to acknowledge the unique cultural identity of Black people from Atlanta. An Atlanta rap group, Outkast, coined the term in 1996. The term has continued to be a pop cultural and colloquial moniker for Black natives of the city. The number of ATLiens compared to transplants is a noteworthy finding for readers of the research because this study is a place-based study that aims to inform about Black middle-class proclivities central to Atlanta, Georgia. Participants reported that they had lived in other places in Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington D.C. prior to Atlanta. The higher percentage of transplants must also be highlighted because prior research states that Atlanta’s historical political agendas,

economic plans, and cultural branding caters to and attracts Black professionals from other geographic locations to the detriment of the native-born Black citizenry (Hobson, 2017). Finally, Figure 3 shows that most people who migrated to Atlanta from another geographic location were Atlanta residents between eleven and thirteen years. This finding is important because it gives insight into how much participants may have assimilated into the cultural aesthetic of the city. Lastly, 81% of the participants live within the Atlanta proper city limit. The remaining 19% live in Metro Atlanta (South Fulton, Lilburn, & Pleasant Hill).

Figure 2: ATLien v. Transplant

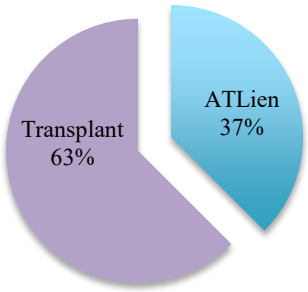
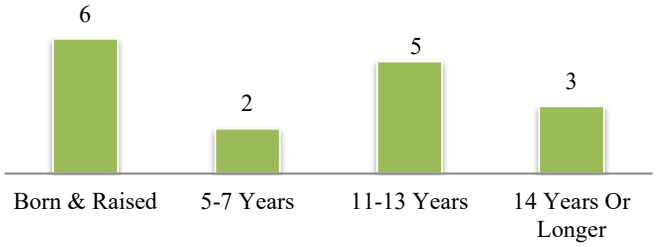


Figure 3: Length of Residence



The Interviewees

Two women and three men were interviewed. Interview time ranged from 45 to 150 minutes. Forty percent of the interview participants are ATLien (one woman/one man). Most interviewees live in Atlanta proper (60%), with a smaller percentage residing in metro Atlanta (40%). Two transplants have lived in the city between five to seven years; the other has lived in the city between eleven to thirteen years. All interview participants are between 35 and 44 years old. Both women have Doctorate of Philosophy degrees; of the men, two have bachelor's degrees, and one holds a master's degree. One male reported pursuing an additional degree in a

master's program. The salary ranges of the interviewees include: 60%—$50,000 to $75,999; 20%—$76,000 to $100,000; and 20%—$100,000^{+}. Two participants are married, two are single, and one is divorced.

Each interviewee was given a pseudonym that combined degree information and the state they lived in prior to the city. Atlanta natives' pseudonyms contain descriptors specific to the city. Pseudonyms also endeavor to label a characteristic about each person that emerged during the interview. A brief description of each interviewee is listed below:

- ***Dr. ATL Educator*** –a female native of Atlanta and a K-12 educator. She lives in Atlanta proper. She believes that education must be holistic, encompassing formal and informal knowledge. One of her primary middle-class cultural expressions is sharing resources so that others, especially family members, who may not have the opportunity otherwise, could be exposed to opportunities and experiences.
- ***Mr. Buckhead HR Bougie***—a male native of Atlanta living in Atlanta proper. He is in a Director position in human resources. He highly values learning about Black historical achievements and consuming contemporary Black cultural aesthetics. One of his main motivations for upward mobility is to have the financial resources to retire his mother. Class mobility is an experience that many in his family have only recently experienced.
- ***Dr. Massachusetts Researcher (Dr. MA Researcher)***—a female resident of Atlanta proper. She moved to Atlanta from North Carolina but is originally from Massachusetts. She holds a Director position in Public Health. While she agrees that she embodies characteristics of ATL's Black middle-class culture, she questions some of the implications of the city's Black middle-class cultural trends. She values the concept of lifting as you climb and practices this through mentoring.

- ***Mr. Ohio Engineer***— a male resident of metro Atlanta. He moved to the city from Ohio and works as a construction engineer. He believes in practicing civic responsibility, such as voting, mentoring, and being active in his alum association. In addition, he places a high value on homeownership because he believes it to be a critical component of generational wealth.
- ***Mr. North Carolina Psalm (Mr. NC Psalm)***—a male resident of metro Atlanta. He moved to the city from North Carolina and is a music educator. His Christian faith is a constant guide in his upward mobility journey. He values being able to embody his Black identity without compromise. He places a high value on marriage /family building and living life purposefully.

Part I: Research Question Findings

In this section, themes from concept mapping and the five semi-structured phenomenological interviews are synthesized to present a comprehensive discussion to answer the four research questions of the study. First, in Figure 4, a thematic concept map that represents the study's conceptual framework is presented. Following the concept map is Table 3, which displays each research question matched to thematic territories from concept mapping and themes from interview data. The table also lists each theme's corresponding concept map clusters or interview codes. Finally, the table presents a summative claim about data results findings for each research question.

Figure 4: Thematic Territories Concept Map

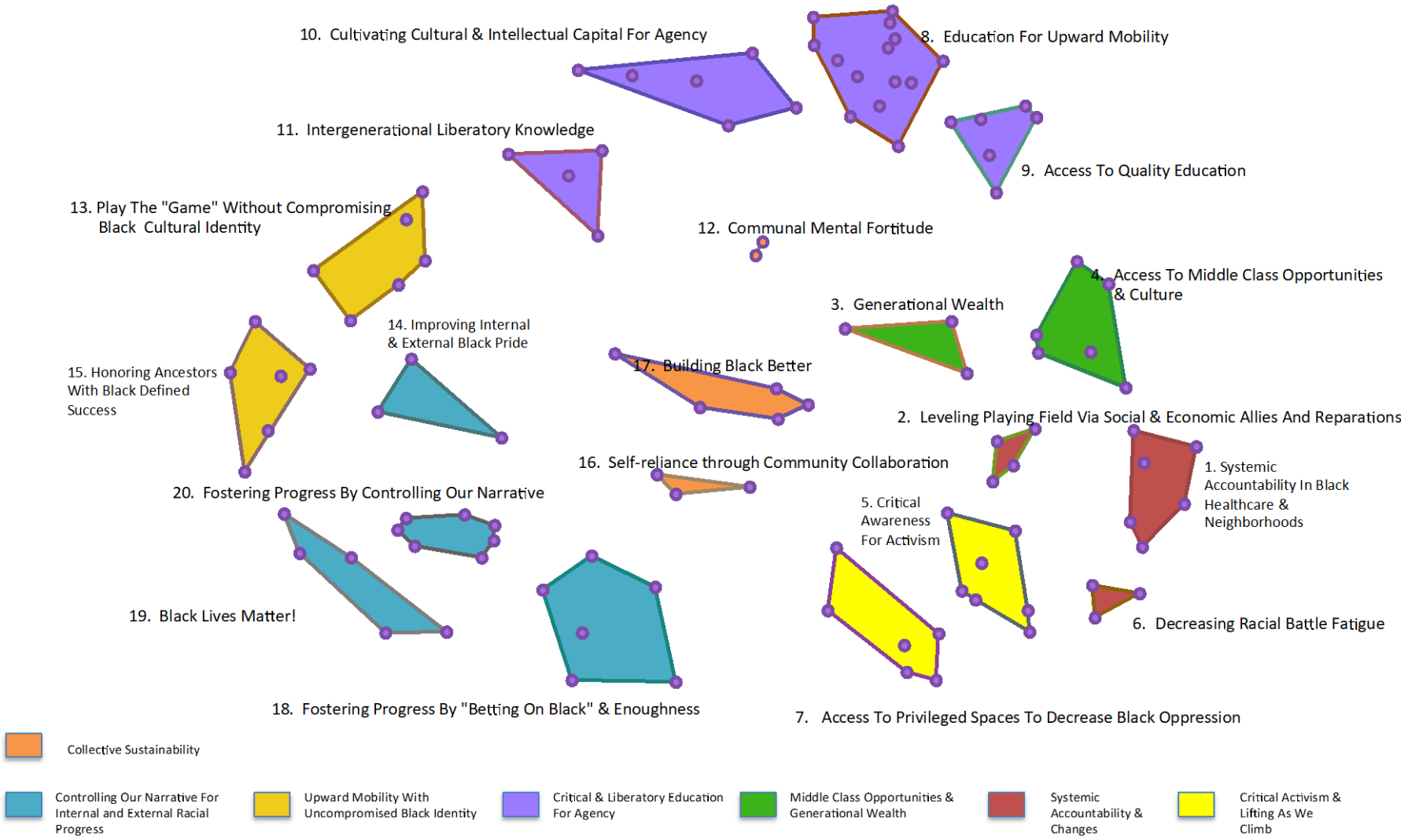


Table 3: Research Questions Matched to Themes From Concept Maps & Interviews

Research Question	Concept Map Theme/Findings	Interview Themes w/ Codes

Q1: What are the success narratives of Atlanta's core Black middle class, that is, how do members account for 'success,' however it is defined?	• **Upward Mobility w/ Uncompromising Black Identity**
	  • Cluster 13. Play The "Game" Without Compromising Black Cultural Identity
	  • Cluster 15. Honoring Ancestors With Black Defined Success
	• **Middle-Class Opportunities & Generational Wealth**
	  • Cluster 4. Access To Middle-Class Opportunities & Culture
	  • Cluster 3: Generational Wealth
		• **Black Defined Success**
		• **Black American Dream**
		• **Black & Bougie**
		  ▪ Access to Middle-Class Experiences
		  ▪ Blackity, Black, Black

Overall Q1 Finding	***The Black American Dream*** is having equitable access to opportunities for upward mobility, middle-class experiences and luxuries, and access to social and cultural capital-rich networks without compromising racial and cultural identities. In addition, it includes embodying in-group success conceptualizations and existing in society sans the fear of physical or psychological racial violence. The ultimate realization of the Black American dream is to build community and family intentionally and purposefully so that their lives honor their ancestors.	

Q2: What are the values and motivations that shape how this class conceives or understands success and how do these relate to various cultural practices?	• **Middle-Class Opportunities & Generational Wealth**
	  • Cluster 4. Access To Middle-Class Opportunities & Culture
	  • Cluster 3: Generational Wealth
	• **Critical & Liberatory Education For Agency**
	  • Cluster 9: Access to Quality Education
	• **Critical Activism & Lifting As We Climb**
	  • Cluster 7: Access to Privileged Spaces To Decrease Black Oppression
		• **Black & Bougie**
		  ▪ Access to Middle-Class Experiences
		  ▪ Blackity, Black, Black
		  ▪ Lifting As You Climb

Overall Q2 Finding	***Black & Bougie*** values include equitable access to quality education, key middle-class experiences such as travel, material and experiential luxuries, creating generational wealth, and providing access to family and community members who have yet to access a middle-class lifestyle. An emphatic value is access to resources, often resulting from upward mobility, so that they can engage in unrestricted embodiments and expressions of blackness and create collective sustainability within the Black community.	

Q3: If distinct success ideologies can be delineated, how does each relate to equity and social justice concerns?	• **Critical Activism & Lifting As We Climb**
	  • Cluster 7. Access To Privileged Spaces To Decrease Black Oppression
	• **Systemic Accountability & Change**
	  • Cluster 6: Decreasing Racial Battle Fatigue
		• **Black Defined Success**
		  ▪ Black, But Not Too Black
		• **Black Defined Equity**

Overall Q3 Finding	***Decreasing Racial Battle Fatigue.*** It is the most salient social justice/equity concern. Black defined equity includes deliberately acquiring access to the sociopolitical spaces to influence resources and policy to counter historically and systemically embedded negative racialization. Accessing privileged spaces is valued because leveraging their privileges to lift others in the race as they strive for their own upward mobility goals is an integral part of their success ideologies. Ultimately the group yearns to be freed of the constant struggle of negotiating racial dynamics that make it more challenging for all Black people to experience upward mobility.	

Q4: What role, if any, has education played in the success narratives and values of this	• **Critical & Liberatory Education For Agency**
	  • Cluster 8. Education For Upward Mobility
	  • Cluster 9. Access To Quality Education
		• **Black Defined Success**
		• **To Be Educated**
		  ▪ That Made Me Feel

class?	• Cluster 10: Cultivating Cultural & Intellectual Capital For Agency • Cluster 11: Intergenerational Liberatory Knowledge	Educated
Q4 Overall Finding	Receiving a ***critical and liberatory education for agency*** is one of the highest-rated values the participants communicated and is a pillar of the group's success ideologies and exercising agency to construct an equitable society. Education must provide knowledge of Black histories, intergenerational and cultural wisdoms, and awareness of the Black sociopolitical reality to disrupt misplaced comfort with inequity and the status quo of American racialization.	

To view a sample listing of clusters and statements, view Appendix L. Appendix M contains a complete list of interview codes and code descriptions.

Analysis of the participants' perspectives, values, and meaning-making revealed interconnected relationships between areas of the map. The relationships between conceptual territories also aligned with insights about the connectedness of themes that emerged during interview transcript analysis. Although each participant organized their thoughts in ways that were meaningful to their experiences, how they conceptualize ideas is sometimes interwoven. In addition, the overall group's thinking was analyzed to inform the relationships that emerged between conceptual territories. Concept map analysis illustrates the relationships between concepts via a bridge/anchor value. Bridging and anchoring—measured on a scale of 0-to-1—" shows the relationship of the statements to its location on the map, based on how it was sorted with other statements" (Kane & Rosas, 2017, p. 48). When an item is closer to 0, it is an anchor cluster or idea. It has a strong relationship with the clusters and statements around it. Anchor areas or ideas reflect where all participants share resolute clarity about their conceptual framing of these ideas; most participants sorted the ideas in that cluster together most frequently. Simply put, the participants thought the same about that concept.

In contrast, bridging ideas have a value closer to 1. Bridging concepts are ideas with a more dispersed relationship throughout the concept map. Bridging ideas give insight into the

clusters' symbiotic relationships and how each cluster's ideas are shaped by one another. During the sorting activity, some participants differed in where they sorted and how they thought about these ideas or areas of the map; as a result, those ideas "bridge" to those places on the map where they were also sorted; however, the final analysis of overall sorting warranted the placement of the idea into its final cluster as it appears on the map. The interviews provided the narratives that help to explain the strength of a bridging value and why a relationship may exist between two conceptual clusters. Analysis of the participants' values, ways of thinking, meaning-making, and the relationships between their conceptualizations answered the research questions. For a comprehensive list of the bridge values for each cluster, view Appendix N.

Q1: The Black American Dream

The first research question is: ***What are the success narratives of Atlanta's core Black middle-class, that is, how do members account for 'success,' however it is defined?*** Participants' ideas and perspectives helped capture their meanings and definitions of success. Concept map themes were embedded within the human experience by analyzing the narratives shared during interviews. Interviewees were asked several questions that prompted them to share their definition of success, detail moments during their lives they felt successful, and describe the "Black American Dream." The conversations resulted in rich responses detailing their conceptualizations of success; however, many people paused quietly for several minutes to construct an answer. In many instances, thinking about success evoked memories from their life when success seemed elusive or unattainable. For example, Mr. Buckhead HR Bougie stated:

> …You know what, oh my god.... like this…. This is a hard question because honestly…I feel like I'm just now getting to where I know that I could be… I just… I've had roadblocks…some very, very bad roadblocks along the way that have kept me from

> getting up here.

Participants provided multifaceted success ideologies. Success includes having access to upward mobility opportunities that result in financial stability to enjoy luxuries and leisure. In addition, success is purposeful and authentic living with the capacity to build community and decrease Black-specific oppression. During concept mapping and interviews, people expressed that they value what they consider to be mainstream indicators of success—money, career opportunities, intellectual and social capital rich social networks, and material possessions. However, most interviewees shared clear descriptions of where they believe their thoughts diverge from mainstream success values. Mr. NC Psalm described explained:

> …To be successful to me means that you are living the best life that you can live, to provide for yourself, and to live the way you dreamed of living as far as what you're born to do…. Success isn't just a monetary thing. I've learned success is a purposeful living…and that you are actually helping other people around you…. Like I said, that's not what society thinks. I think success also comes in the form of how well you're doing in the process of getting to where you want to go…success is not just getting there, success is making your way through the process of getting the lessons and the different tools that you need to succeed at the level that you want to be at. Success is also, for me, family ties…self-love…. Did you love yourself? Do you want to be yourself? …. [It] also has a level of spiritual soundness to it, that you're not just living to just live day-to-day, but there's a bigger reason why… the divine or the universe, you are one with that, or you're in communion with that…

Mr. NC Psalm's discussion of success has many similarities to other participants' definitions. Like all other participants, he explicitly stated where his description deviates from mainstream

notions in providing his definition. Dr. ATL Educator's definition includes factors not discussed by Mr. NC Psalm:

> I see everything as success…. Graduating, with all my degrees. Success. Getting married, and staying married for six years.... success. Being able to take care my mom now that she's older…just being available, and willing to just give back to her in a way that she has done for me. That's success... it is not only financial. Part of it is financial success, but the other part is just being available, like if she has to go to the doctor, because she doesn't drive on the expressway. To me, those things embody success. Going on vacation. That's success. Teaching my students and they actually learn, that's success…. doing things that actually builds a village that makes community.

For Dr. ATL Educator, success includes mainstream markers such as college graduation and possessing the financial resources to enjoy vacations and expose family members to key life experiences. Her ideology also shares a sentiment held by other participants; success includes the financial capacity to provide and care for parents. Her ideology also includes helping others and community building. Dr. MA Researcher and Dr. ATL Educator also believe that the luxury of time and availability are indicators of success. In interviews, the thematic threads that describe success definitions are *Black defined success, Black and bougie, and the Black American Dream.* In concept mapping, the thematic territories that align with these interview themes are *upward mobility without compromising Black identity* and *middle-class opportunities & generational wealth.*

The ideas participants shared that comprise these themes illuminate various components of the group's success ideologies. In addition, the concept map clusters and interview codes within these themes contain specific details about success ideologies that are distinctive to

people experiencing social marginalization. The theme, *upward mobility without compromising Black identity*, contains clusters with the highest bridge values in the conceptual framework. Two clusters in this theme: **upward mobility without compromising Black identity (cluster 13)**—bridge value .90 and **honoring ancestors with Black defined success (cluster 15**)—bridge value .77 showcase success conceptualizations that were unique to the Black experience. The ideas that comprise these clusters influence and have strong symbiotic connections to concepts and values on almost every part of the map. The bridging value of the clusters also indicates that they were motivators of upward mobility goals and shaped cultural practices. In addition, the bridge values support connections that people described during interviews and ultimately emerged during the interview transcript analysis.

The ideas participants shared in the theme *upward mobility without compromising Black identity* are: “taking advantage of resources and opportunity our ancestors fought for us to have" (bridge value 1) and "knowing how to exist in 'their" world" (bridge value 1). Other ideas expressed that describe phenomena that are unique to Black experiences with success are "moving beyond having to celebrate the "1st Black person to accomplish or do something” (bridge value .93); “being deemed ‘successful by others” (bridge value .87); and “Black families being able to define success in ways that do not look to Whiteness as their standard” (bridge value .80). These ideas indicate that success for the participants includes having cultural and class resources to gain entry to and navigate social/professional spaces their race group had been historically and are currently excluded from. In addition, they are aware that part of their success ideologies also includes knowing how to successfully contend with White/hegemonic perceptions and perceived legitimacy to be present in spaces of privilege. Additionally, the participants desire freedom from that dynamic. The success narratives and concept maps also

illustrate that participants are motivated to achieve mainstream notions of success because their ability to penetrate social and professional spaces their ancestors could not is important because it indicates racial progress. To the study group, access to these places means their ancestors' struggle for humanity and rights had not been in vain. These values suggest that experiencing upward mobility is viewed as a form of resistance to oppression and discrimination.

The success ideologies of each participant contain similarities to others and propensities unique to the individual. During interview analysis, a theme, *Black American Dream,* emerged that captured the participants' perspectives and definitions of success. Dr. MA Researcher described the Black American Dream as such:

> I say the Black American Dream is that our children are safe… whether they're our own biological children or the children of our community. That our children have a better experience than we did ...not subjected to active discrimination. That we can be freely ourselves in the workplace…in society without feeling judged and ridiculed and discriminated against. Definitely have some modicum of financial success…everything else beyond those things, I think it's the same as the regular American Dream in general, which is, you know, the white picket fence… the 2.5 kids…whatever society says is success.

Her ideas about the Black American Dream illustrate that aspects of Black success ideology align with majoritarian ideologies; however, some elements were unique to the Black experience. The things unique to the Black experience she described are contending with discrimination and yearning to show up authentically in professional spaces without fear of ostracization. Mr. Ohio Engineer describes more about the contrast between mainstream success and his ideas about success. His thoughts provided more elements to the Black American Dream:

> [In America] if you had money, or if you have money, you have the power, if you don't have money, you don't have power. It's different [in] my view of success… you can be successful in other ways, and not have a lot of money, but mainstream media…society, is you have to have money. [Black success] I think one for me is being a homeowner. You know, it's doing the impossible because a lot of Black people, rent, they don't own…*(pausing to reflect).* I don't want to ever have so much money that I forget the fact that I am Black.

His commentary alludes to the phenomenon of wanting class mobility but desiring to stay authentically connected to his cultural identity. In addition, he wanted to avoid being associated with claims that upwardly mobile Blacks disassociate with Black culture and identity.

Mr. NC Psalm's expounded more about the Black American Dream:

> The Black American Dream… is to get married to build a family, to get a house, to build generational wealth. That's the Black American Dream, which is the American Dream. The defining differences [of the] Black American Dream…. is to survive, you know, because while we're building this white picket fence, we're seeing now that a gunman can come and shoot through it. So a part of the Black American Dream is a survival thing…teach your son and daughter how to live through it. The Black American Dream is to get an education…a job. Get some type of trade under your belt. The Black American Dream is a spiritual act in which we're, like Jesus or Moses… that you're going to go through. So while you're going through, get what you need to get, so that you can survive it and endure what you're getting ready to go through.

While the Black American Dream includes many of the same earmarks of success as the American Dream, the participants also believe that safety and survival are critical aspects of

Black success realization. Upward mobility was simultaneously a vehicle for accessing luxury, coveted class experiences, honoring ancestors, and securing the resources to improve equity. The dream also includes having the mental and spiritual fortitude to survive the challenges that Black people face as they achieve. Ultimately the core Black middle class in this study accounted for success in this way:

> ***The Black American Dream*** is having equitable access to opportunities for upward mobility, middle-class experiences and luxuries, and access to social and cultural capital-rich networks without compromising racial and cultural identities. In addition, it includes embodying in-group success conceptualizations and existing in society sans the fear of physical or psychological racial violence. The ultimate realization of the Black American dream is to build community and family intentionally and purposefully so that their lives honor their ancestors.

Q2: Black & Bougie

The success ideologies of the group directly inform participants' values, motivations, and cultural practices. The study's second research question asks: ***What are the values and motivations that shape how this class conceives or understands success, and how do these relate to various cultural practices?*** Participants' narratives explained that success equates to experiencing certain life events, opportunities, cultural identities, and lifestyles sans negative racialization. Striving to realize this dream catalyzes their upward mobility efforts. In addition, many of their values and motivations shape their middle-class cultural identity and behaviors. The themes that emerged from the participant ideas and narratives that highlight the group's success values, motivations, and cultural practices are: *middle-class opportunities & generational wealth; critical & liberatory education for agency; Black & bougie; and collective*

sustainability. In addition, specific cultural expressions and lifestyle choices that communicate values are also described within these themes.

Narrative excerpts from participant interviews that align with class values and success motivators make up the theme *Black & bougie*. This theme discusses the specifics of how Atlanta's core Black middle class prefers to express their class identities. There is a heavy emphasis on embodying a middle-class identity while simultaneously fully embodying Black racial and cultural identities. Each participant was asked to describe what it means to be middle class and what they value most about the experience. Mr. Ohio Engineer stated:

> I think in my opinion, middle class is... well, you're not able to do everything that you want to do financially, but you're also not struggling to do things... financially. You can at least take care of your basic necessities, and certain luxuries, you know. I would say lower classes, you're kind of.... struggling just to get your basic necessities essentially.

The middle-class experiences and luxuries Dr. ATL Educator values are:

> …I don't have kids. So I always try to make sure that I expose the kids, and some of the adults, to different opportunities that they may not be afforded, because their household is lacking in the financial arena. So, I have the pass to the Children's Museum. I have like, all of the activities. We're going on a trip, like once a year in the summertime, just for that exposure. I think when you're able to meet your needs, your wants and also help those in your village to achieve some of their goals or to have experiences… to me, that's what it means to be middle-class...and to be able to travel.

Mr. Ohio Engineer and Dr. ATL Educator value experiences stereotypically associated with middle-class positionality. Dr. ATL Educator's idea about providing access to family members aligns with the ideas participants grouped into the thematic territories of *collective sustainability*

and *critical activism & lifting as we climb.* Within these themes, the participants shared that they are motivated to be upwardly mobile because they want to “have a seat at the ‘table’ to be able to influence policy, funding, and help direct resources to Black communities” (bridge value .43) and “creating opportunities and access to Black wealth for ourselves and others in the Black community” (bridge value .35). The interview narratives and concept map ideas show that one of the reasons Atlanta’s core Black middle class is motivated to achieve is because they desire to create opportunities for others in the Black community.

The concept map thematic territories illuminated additional examples of the cultural practices and values that motivate the group's success goals. The themes *middle-class opportunities & generational wealth* contain two clusters that specifically describe success motivators and values. One cluster that informs this theme is **access to middle-class opportunities & culture (cluster 4)**—value-rated 4.31 in upward mobility values. The values expressed in this cluster are: "knowing how to access the same or better experiences as non-Blacks" (bridge value .72); "Black people having opportunity in terms of employment and entrepreneurship" (bridge value .58); and "striving for social and education equity to change the culture of always struggling for fair treatment in the Black community" (bridge value .56). Participants explained during interviews that they are interested in employment opportunities and having the same experiences as non-Black people because they value having access to the resources to enjoy the luxuries of life on their own terms. It was explained that high salaries are desired because they result in homeownership, neighborhood choice, travel, and providing for parents. A higher salary also increases the capacity to create generational wealth. Another cluster in this theme is **generational wealth (cluster 3)**. It is value-rated 4.2 in upward mobility values. Participants grouped three ideas into this cluster that detail their values and motivations related to

generational wealth. The idea in this cluster with the highest bridge value (.48) is "being high-achieving, upwardly mobile, and politically active to counter inequality, and acquire wealth to set an example and give hope to the following generation." Participants are motivated to be upwardly mobile so that they can pave pathways to opportunities for younger generations and demonstrate the kinds of lived experiences they desire younger generations to have. Another value expressed in this cluster is "home ownership and the ability to pass down property to descendants to help build generational wealth." Although the participants value middle-class experiences and luxuries, they are also motivated by the desire to create longstanding wealth that will benefit future generations. The resource participants believe to be most critical to creating longstanding class stability, essential life experiences, and generational wealth creation is education.

The clusters within the thematic territory *critical and liberatory education for agency* describe the education beliefs of the class that are central to participants' class identity, values, and cultural practices. The clusters in this thematic territory are unique because they are also anchor ideas. The ideas in this concept map theme illuminate values and motivators that are pillars of the group's ideologies. **Access to quality education (cluster 9),** a cluster within this theme, has the second lowest bridge value— .27, making it an anchor idea in the findings. Participants think that "sustained access to quality education along with social equity to upend systemic disadvantages that have plagued Blacks since this country's inception" (bridge value .34) is critical to realizing their successes. Another value and motivation is "removing non-culturally responsive and poor quality education that limits upward mobility and keeps the literacy rate low and incarceration of the Black community high" (bridge value .29). These ideas are at the foundation of why participants pursue upward mobility opportunities and explain the

culture of high educational achievement within the group. Atlanta's core Black middle-class values sustained access to culturally responsive education because they correlate it to theirs, and future generations', ability to exert agency and control their destinies. They believe that quality education could bolster the ability to realize values and desires communicated in the themes *Black defined success* and *decrease racial battle fatigue.* From the perspective of the participants, access to quality education would "empower the most disenfranchised [of the race]" and result in "decreased social, political, and financial inequity" (bridge value .41). The ideas and values within the theme of *critical and liberatory education* communicate that participants were motivated to secure a particular kind of education for themselves and the most disenfranchised Black people to counter and ultimately dismantle systemic disadvantages and inequity. In the view of the study's participants, access to quality education is one of their foremost concerns and motivations to achieve.

Each participant was asked to describe Black middle-class culture and what it means to be "Black and bougie." Their ideas show that they believe that while the term "bougie" had historically held some pejorative connotations, it had transformed into a contemporary identity descriptor they proudly identify with. Mr. NC Psalm explained his ideas about the term bougie and participating in a study exploring contemporary middle-class performances in this way:

> I also was very intrigued by the word "bougie" because I identify as that as well. [I have had] life experiences…that made me deal with what it meant to be educated as a Black man in America….[…] post civil rights and integration… we had mobility where there were African Americans going above and beyond to get education. And sometimes that above and beyond to become bougie was in the face of other Black people saying that those individuals were tokens or those individual are sellouts…I guess you can say there's

> classism within African Americans. And so you know, the word bougie is almost like, this divisive of kind of term, it can be. But you know, there are generations of African Americans that have fought and bled and died for the generations after them to experience wealth, to experience health, to experience ownership, and entrepreneurship. And there's nothing wrong with that…. I feel like the word bougie can also be classified with the word educated...[…] I cherish it…, it's more to it than just money… And it's more to it than materialistic gain and possessions. It's about how someone has fought and grinded to get to a place in life where they have some of the finer things in life.

In addition to identifying with the class descriptor "bougie," all participants believe that inhabiting both bourgeois class and Black cultural identities could be accomplished without compromising either.

One way that participants protect their racial identity is through various cultural expressions. Hairstyle choice was one of the most frequent practices discussed for men and women of the study that was an intentional Black cultural expression within middle-class social spaces. Participants also reported other cultural practices such as only patronizing Black businesses, consuming Black-dominant or Black-only entertainment, attending Black places of worship, and consuming Black aesthetics through art and history. In numerous interviews, the phrase "blackety, blackity, black" was used to describe how staunchly embedded into "blackness" their behaviors and practices were. Dr. ATL Educator stated:

> One of the things that comes to mind is actually loc-ing my hair. Like this, blackety blackity, black ....And I probably did so because when I walk into a room…you probably 'gon have an idea like, oh, okay, she could be like, really, really Black. Because nothing about this is assimilating to White norms or to what's acceptable in society.

Mr. NC Psalm explained that he does not strictly patronize Black businesses, but he does check to determine if it's possible: “I'll look them up on Google and say, you know, is there a Black-owned shop that sells donuts? Like is there a Black donut…I did it yesterday...or dessert place?” He also explained how his racial and cultural beliefs influenced his choices about places of worship:

> I even left my church because… because my church that I was attending was mostly a multi-ethnic, White church. And so I exited out because I didn't feel… that was meeting a need of mine. I want to be a part of worshiping body that identifies racially with what I identify. I left [that] church two years ago. I attend a…Black church because of how the pastor preaches, but also their theology on racism and social justice.

Mr. Buckhead HR Bougie provided additional examples of how he actively inhabited his racial identity while also living his middle-class reality:

> Nah, we ain't about giving these White people money. And they don't care about us. Like, if we're going to be spending money like that…let's find some Black-owned clothing company that we can give our money to. You know that necklace that I was talking about? (*referring to an earlier discussion about culturally expressive jewelry)* You know…I went to this whole Black-owned experience type thing in Atlantic Station and got my stuff. You know what I'm saying… candles, all this other stuff…just supporting Black business, I'm getting back to more holistic stuff that we should be doing in the first place. Going to the vitamin lady on Auburn Avenue to get, you know, medicine….I try to do everything, anything that I can do this way… Black, I do it. I'm here for all of you. And I think that that's important. Not only for uplifting our race, but just so that we don't forget, we don't want to be so involved in just regular society that we start forgetting

where we came from…to the point our whole identity is washed.

The values and ideas within the concept map and interviews communicate that agency and liberation for the Black race are significant motivators of core Black middle-class achievements. However, they also value indulging in the class benefits afforded by middle-class salaries, social networks, and experiences while being uncompromisingly and unapologetically Black. In summation:

> ***Black & Bougie*** values include equitable access to quality education, key middle-class experiences such as travel, material and experiential luxuries, creating generational wealth, and providing access to family and community members who have yet to access a middle-class lifestyle. An emphatic value is access to resources, often resulting from upward mobility, so that they can engage in unrestricted embodiments and expressions of blackness and create collective sustainability within the Black community.

Q3: Decreasing Racial Battle Fatigue

The concept map data and interview narratives participants shared illustrate that the success ideologies of the participants are intimately intertwined with social justice/equity concerns. Most of their values concerning upward mobility are catalyzed by the desire to experience improved social conditions. The third research question of this inquiry is*:* ***If distinct success ideologies can be delineated, how does each relate to equity and social justice concerns?*** The findings from the study's first research question illustrate several success ideologies within the participant group. Although all success conceptualizations include financial resources, none of the participants describe financial accumulation as an ultimate goal. Atlanta's core Black middle class desires financial resources and wealth because they aim to leverage them to gain sustained access to experiences and opportunities. In addition, when participants describe

success conceptualizations in terms of the "Black American Dream," their answers reveal social, political, and economic areas where participants yearn for more equitable treatment. Within the concept map, the thematic territories that provide insight into the social justice concerns of the group are *critical activism & lifting as we* climb and *systemic accountability & change.* Interviews explored the thoughts included in these areas of the map further. My analysis of the interview responses about these areas of the map resulted in two correlating themes: *Black defined success* and *Black defined equity.* While participants enjoy the benefits of their middle-class positionality, they also understand that they must be intensely and intentionally focused on improving social and political conditions for overall Black betterment.

Each interviewee and concept map participant is ambitiously upwardly mobile. They actively seek out opportunities to gain more experience and income. They were motivated by the values they indicated during concept mapping and interviews. Despite their ambitions and success realizations, the group has concerns about the systemic and social constraints that complicate their success trajectories and mitigate success realization for Black people. Some of the career social equity concerns are illuminated within the themes *Black defined success* and *being Black, but not too Black.* Dr. ATL Educator believes, "people of lighter skin could have more access to opportunities, especially in the corporate world…you can be Black, but not too Black." Colorism—discrimination based on skin tone—was a factor that participants did not readily discuss or acknowledge as part of their upward mobility and social injustice experiences. However, in a direct conversation about it, there is unanimous agreement among the interviewees that it is a concern within the Black community and in external economic and social class spaces. The tendency of participants to fail to comment about colorism unless directly asked suggests that the phenomenon is so pervasive that it is difficult to detect and is not easily

perceived as something abnormal. The ideas and narratives people shared during the study indicate that they believe colorism is more pronounced when attempting to access professional opportunities historically inaccessible to Black people. Dr. MA Researcher explained that she believes her lighter skin feels less threatening to White colleagues: "I do feel that White men in particular are a little bit less threatened by me, I think, in certain aspects... it's like this middle ground."

Each participant explained their version of social/justice equity as they reflected on and discussed what factors would create a more equitable society. Mr. Ohio Engineer's conceptualizations aligned with the overall theme of *systemic accountability & change*. During his interview, he described what he believes about increasing social equity:

> With George Floyd, there was body camera footage. There was also other footage... that's why those officers were brought to justice… and even the one down in South Georgia, Ahmaud Arbery. Although that was not a police incident, I think I remember reading about it a few times. And the first few times I read about it…well, it sounds sketchy, but there's no video. There's no way they're going to charge them with a crime. And then a video came out, and it was like, Whoa! You know, this is like, they really… yeah…chased down the man. With Breonna Taylor… had there been body camera then we would really know, okay, this is what really happened…I think, at least in my opinion, that's part of the reason that they didn't want to file charges.

In his opinion, surveillance of authority figures was necessary to ensure justice system accountability and in instances of racist violence against Black people. He believes that discrimination and hate crimes against Black people are so pervasively embedded into the everyday social fabric that they are only countered when there is irrefutable evidence—to the

degree of video footage—that a hate crime or racial violence had occurred.

Mr. Buckhead HR Bougie is troubled by his reflections about what it means to experience social equity. His conversation on the topic shows that he likens discriminatory treatment to a social experiment:

> …It just means that I want us to be treated just like every other White person is treated. Because to me, that's where the standard is, right? So like, they're the control group, so to speak. It seems like, you know, depending on where your race is, you're treated here, or here, or here (motioning different levels with his hands). But it's like naw! If they're the control group, we should be treated equally! We would love better, but you know, that would be wrong for them. So no, we need to be treated, just like White people in America. That is so horrible. Like when I say that out loud. It's so horrible to say, but it's true. We want to be treated like the White people.

Mr. Buckhead HR Bougie's discomfort with his thinking about Black equity underscores the overall burden and exhaustion of racialization at the heart of what participants yearn to dismantle. He knows that more equitable conditions are needed; however, his experiences in life have not provided a tangible example of what equity should look like beyond what he assumes his White counterparts experience.

The thoughts Mr. Buckhead HR Bougie expressed in this interview are unpacked further in the concept map theme *critical activism and lifting as we climb.* The participants' values were heavily focused on countering negative racialization. One way they intend to do this is by gaining **access to privileged spaces to decrease Black oppression (cluster 7)**—value-rated 4.48; the second highest priority in social equity value ratings. This cluster has a bridge value of .57, indicating that the values in this cluster influence more than half of the values, success

conceptualizations, and thematic territories on the concept map. Dr. MA Researcher's thoughts explained why access to privileged spaces is a priority of the group:

> I think that we're doing a lot of performative things, and not a lot of standards, policies, procedures, policy changes, laws, et cetera. We can write laws…but it's the practice of it… I think equity, and social justice is the active monitoring that they're living out those [equity] trainings… policies. It's the swift justice when things are done against those written policies or against those things that were meant to enforce equitable or inclusive practices.

Participants understand that their ability to embody success is directly correlated to the level of societal equity. Equity extends beyond laws and policies and includes actions to ensure those policies are enacted to make a difference in their lives. One of the most salient concerns regarding social justice and equity is that participants desire to be relieved of the need to counter and fight against social inequity constantly. Another concept within the theme of *systemic accountability & change* is **decreasing racial battle fatigue (cluster 6)**. This cluster is value-rated 4.57 in social equity values. With regard to improving social equity, Atlanta's core Black middle class wants to "remov[e] the inequities that require Black people to work harder and go through more" hoop" to be successful." The ideas and values participants conceptually locate in the thematic territory *critical activism & lifting as we climb* illustrate that Atlanta's core Black middle class strongly believes that they must be deliberate to target the upward mobility opportunities that will position them to "[have] a seat at the "table" to be able to influence policy, funding, and help direct resources back to Black communities." They are also serious about "overcoming systemic boundaries that do not necessarily challenge White individuals." The values and ideas participants conceptually locate into this cluster, supported by the .57 bridge

value, are strongly intertwined with overall success and social justice definitions the study group holds. Black defined equity is:

> ***Decreasing Racial Battle Fatigue.*** It is the most salient social justice/equity concern. Black defined equity includes deliberately acquiring access to the sociopolitical spaces to influence resources and policy to counter historically and systemically embedded negative racialization. Accessing privileged spaces is valued because leveraging their privileges to lift others in the race as they strive for their own upward mobility goals is an integral part of their success ideologies. Ultimately the group yearns to be freed of the constant struggle of negotiating racial dynamics that make it more challenging for all Black people to experience upward mobility.

Q4: A Critical & Liberatory Education for Agency

Education is a significant factor in the conceptual framework of this research. A fifth of the clusters on the map are about the group's education values and priorities, resulting in the theme *critical & liberatory education for agency* being one of the largest thematic territories on the map. Participants' narratives and ideas highlight the role of education in their upward mobility trajectories and underscore the importance of it in the participants' success and social equity ideologies. While one interview question directly asked participants to respond to what it meant to be educated, most of the education findings were provided organically without being prompted to discuss the role of education. The fourth research question of this inquiry is: ***What role, if any, has education played in the success narratives and values of this class?*** Many participants view acquiring education as an indication of success and as an invaluable resource that is necessary to experience upward mobility and social equity. Education is highly valued amongst the participants because it is also a sociopolitical area of grave systemic social equity

transgressions in the Black community.

Participants were asked to describe moments when they felt most successful. Many of the stories shared gave tangible examples of how and why education is a critical factor and often a part of one of their proudest achievements. For example, Dr. MA Researcher shared this story from her life:

> The reason that I got that job was because my resume was on some sort of listserv or database….I've never had that experience of like, not applying for a job like just you, coming to me and asked me to, to apply. And I got that job…I got three weeks into the job and I was on a plane going to Vietnam. And that was a totally new experience for me. I had been out of the country before…but being in Vietnam was a totally different experience…. I was using... my new degree in public health. I was working on HIV and other things, I was expanding my repertoire… learning what I was good at, and feeling, you know, accomplished. I felt very successful at the time.

Mr. Buckhead HR Bougie's discussion of education described how achieving his degree is one of his proudest moments. He explained:

> When I got my bachelor's….I was like, hey, you know what…getting an undergrad degree was actually hard. I put in a lot of work for that. So I realized, okay, I'm not going to undersell myself anymore because I "just" have a bachelor's. I put in that work….
>
> From that standpoint I was like, yeah, I'm an educated brother!

Educational achievement is an integral component of interviewees' overall achievement ideologies because they believe it increases their capacity to experience upward mobility.

Four clusters comprise the education theme of *critical and liberatory education for agency.* The name of the clusters of this theme also sheds light on the role of education in the

participants' success and social equity conceptualizations*:*

- **Education for upward mobility (cluster 8)**
- **Access to quality education (cluster 9)**
- **Cultivating cultural & intellectual capital for agency (cluster 10)**
- **Intergenerational liberatory knowledge (cluster 11)**

Participants highly value **access to quality education** to experience upward mobility (value rating 4.47) and social equity/justice (value rating 4.44). From the perspective of Atlanta's core Black middle class, **access to quality** (bridge value .27) is an anchor belief; this low bridge value aligns with the importance they place on education in realizing the kind of successes and equality they value. Another important anchor belief of the group is that education should intentionally and purposefully prepare people to take advantage of upward mobility opportunities. The cluster **education for upward mobility** has a bridge value .13. Participants believe education is necessary to experience upward mobility and also believe success includes educational achievement. The bridge value associated with this cluster of beliefs is the lowest bridge value of all clusters. The specific belief within this thematic territory that explains the role of education is "education… provides the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to pursue entry, intermediate, and advanced career paths to be able to build wealth" (bridge value 0). They also think that "acquiring higher education… improve[s] the class status of the overall community" (bridge value .09) and that it increases an individual's capacity to "access class-based definitions of success that non-Black people occupy" (bridge value .08).

The participants believe that education of the right kind fosters agency that will help future generations upend systemic inequity. In their perspective, education must also be the responsibility of families so that they can ensure that specific kinds of wisdoms and intelligences

are taught. To build generational wealth and legacies of achievement "families [must] communicate the value of education and fighting inequity." In their view, education must increase both intellectual and cultural capital. The participants believe that "educating Black people about African American/Black history and persistent inequities…will "motivate [them] to keep dismantling [inequity] and not get comfortable." Most importantly they believe education that critically engages youth and adults with these topics would prevent repeating racist and discriminatory practices from the past. For these reasons, education is critical to the participants' definitions of success and social equity/justice. Educational achievements are seen as pillars of their success conceptualizations, and quality education is considered an invaluable resource in constructing an equitable society. In summary:

> Receiving a ***critical and liberatory education for agency*** is one of the highest-rated values the participants communicated and is a pillar of the group's success ideologies and exercising agency to construct an equitable society. Education must provide knowledge of Black histories, intergenerational and cultural wisdoms, and awareness of the Black sociopolitical reality to disrupt misplaced comfort with inequity and the status quo of American racialization.

Part II: Concept Map—Upward Mobility & Social Equity Values

In the preceding discussion, the significant themes that emerged from the concept map and interview data analysis were presented in a synthesized discussion to answer the research questions of this study. In this section, a deeper discussion of the education, social equity, and class values of the core Black middle-class people living in Atlanta, Georgia is presented. In this section, the conceptual map of the study will be presented with two overlays: 1) an overlay of upward mobility values and 2) an overlay of social equity values. In addition to displaying how

participants think, the map also illustrates how important the participants believe each cluster of ideas is to either experiencing upward mobility or creating an equitable society for Black people. The value ratings displayed are averages of the individual rating data each participant input for each of the 108 ideas/statements during the ranking activity. Each map displays the same cluster of ideas, as this is the conceptual framing for this study's inquiry. What is different is the level of importance each cluster of ideas has based on if the map reflects participants' values concerning the phenomenon of upward mobility or constructing an equitable society. The value ratings of the individual statements comprising the clusters also shift based on whether participants rated for upward mobility or social equity/justice. The discussion in this section explores the beliefs and values the participants shared during the brainstorming activity with greater depth. The in-depth discussions of these ideas add more insights about motivators of success, social justice concerns, and the role of education in success ideologies.

Upward Mobility Cluster Map

The upward mobility values cluster map was derived from asking participants to consider, *"how much does this statement matter to overall Black achievement?*" Participants indicated value on a scale of one to five, with five being the greatest. On the map, more layers indicate a higher value rating, with five-layered clusters being the highest (Figure 5). Value ratings ranged from 3.51 to 4.51. The four highest-valued clusters— rated 4.42 to 4.51—are discussed in detail. See Table 5 to view the complete list of clusters and average value ratings.

Figure 5: Upward Mobility Values Map

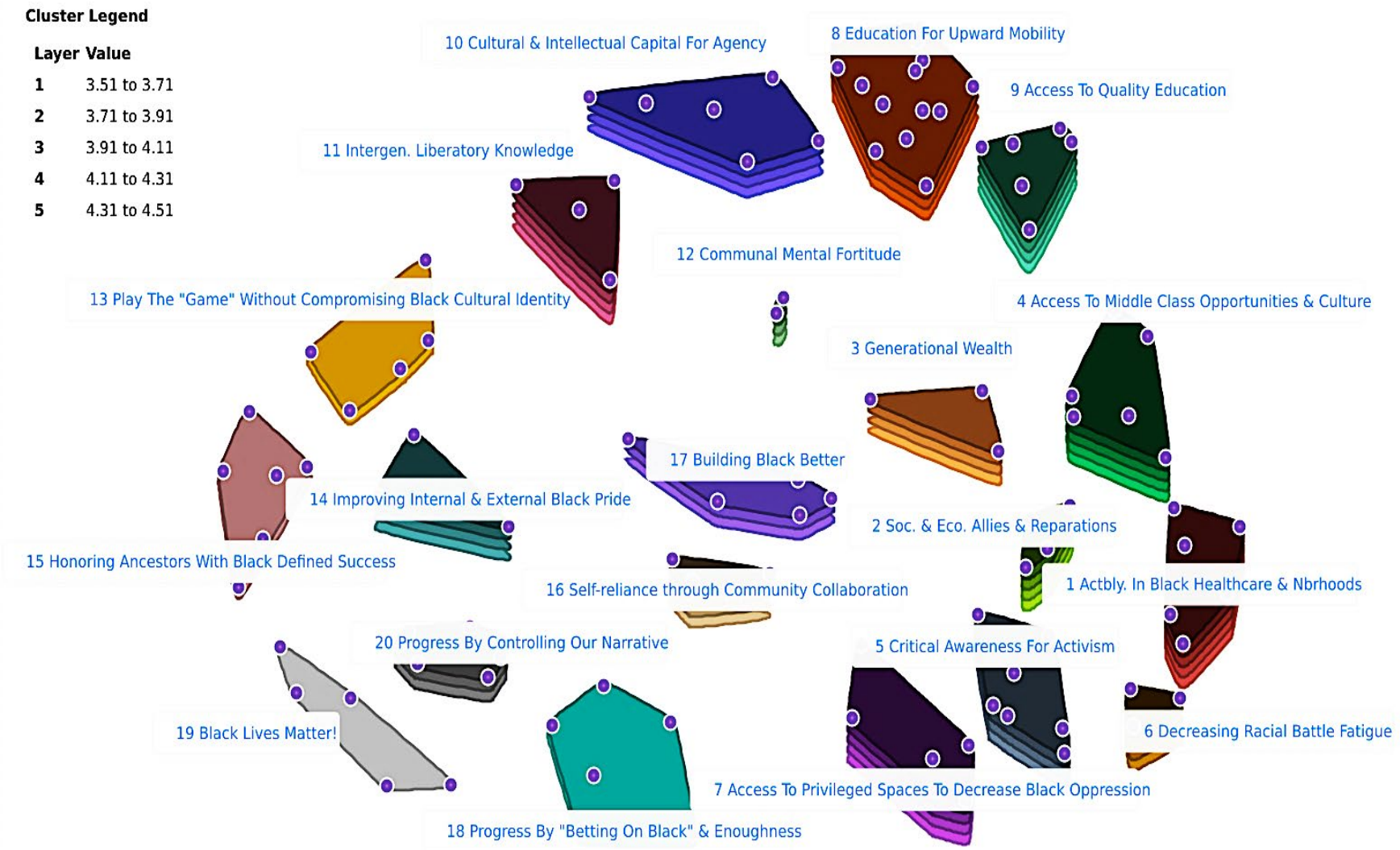


Table 4: All Upward Mobility Clusters & Value Ratings

Upward Mobility Values			
Value Rating	**Layers On Map**	**Cluster Number**	**Cluster Name**
4.51	5	1	Systemic Accountability In Black Healthcare & Neighborhoods
4.47	5	9	Access To Quality Education
4.42	5	6	Decreasing Racial Battle Fatigue
4.42	5	16	Self-Reliance Through Community Collaboration
4.32	5	7	Access To Privileged Spaces To Decrease Black Oppression
4.32	5	2	Leveling Playing Field Via Social & Economic Allies and Reparations
4.32	5	11	Intergenerational Liberatory Knowledge
4.31	5	4	Access To Middle-Class Opportunities & Culture
4.28	4	10	Cultivating Cultural & Intellectual Capital For Agency
4.27	4	12	Communal Mental Fortitude
4.25	4	5	Critical Awareness For Activism
4.20	4	3	Generational Wealth
4.16	4	14	Improving Internal & External Black Pride
4.15	4	8	Education For Upward Mobility
4.08	3	17	Building Black Better
3.99	3	20	Fostering Progress By Controlling Our Narrative
3.89	2	18	Fostering Progress By "Betting On Black" & Enoughness
3.79	2	15	Honoring Ancestors With Black Defined Success
3.78	2	13	Play The "Game" Without Compromising Black Cultural Identity
3.51	1	19	Black Lives Matter!

Participants value **systemic accountability in Black healthcare and neighborhoods (cluster 1)** the highest regarding upward mobility. This cluster has a value rating of 4.51. This cluster was one of the three clusters that comprised the overall thematic territory *systemic accountability and changes.* Participants sorted six of the 108 statements into this cluster:

Table 5: Upward Mobility Cluster 1 Statements & Ratings

Statement Number	Rating	Statements
1	4.73	The system (public institutions/government regulations for private businesses) equally granting access to equitable healthcare to live longer lives
12	4.67	Decreased redlining in the homeownership process in specific areas
94	4.43	A government system of accountability being constructed to ensure that Blacks are able to achieve upward mobility and success
2	4.40	The system (public institution/government regulations for private businesses) equally granting access to healthy food
3	4.40	The system (public institutions/government regulations for private businesses) equally granting access to healthy natural environments

96	4.40	Countering the social norm of Black people disproportionately entering the criminal justice system due to racial profiling or receiving unfair sentencing and causing negative impacts to Black families

These values show that systemic inequality is the most pressing concern and is a perceived barrier to upward mobility for Atlanta's core Black middle class. They also believe upward mobility would be more accessible if the government took a more active approach to creating regulations and accountability measures to stave discriminatory practices in healthcare, home lending, food availability, environmental health, and the criminal justice system. Participants also believe that government regulations should discourage negative racialization in private industries where most Black people negotiate various discriminatory practices in attempting to experience career advancements. The values also suggest that participants deeply understood the endemic nature of the challenges that prevent and stagnate upward mobility trajectories. Their experiences with these phenomena have made them believe that solutions must seek to upend systemically protected and propagated discrimination and racism. Further, these solutions must be from an entity with authority and reach because Black-specific negative racialization is pervasive.

The values and ideas participants grouped into the cluster **access to quality education (cluster 9)** are second in importance and value for experiencing upward mobility. This cluster is value-rated 4.47. This cluster is one of the five in the concept map thematic territory *critical and liberatory education for agency.* Participants placed six ideas into this cluster during the sorting activity:

Table 6: Upward Mobility Cluster 9 Statements & Ratings

Statement Number	Rating	Statements
98	4.87	Empowering the most disenfranchised among us through better quality education and decreased social, political, and financial inequity
11	4.73	Removing barriers to quality education and higher education that keeps the Black voice silenced in creating policies that call for equality for all individuals
101	4.47	Sustained access to quality education along with social equity to upend systemic

		disadvantages that have plagued Blacks since this country's inception to increase Black upward mobility and success
95	4.40	Removing non-culturally responsive and poor quality education that limits upward mobility and keeps the literacy rate low and incarceration of the Black community high
68	4.20	Decreasing the cost and increasing the quality of schools (elementary, secondary, post-secondary) to increase the likelihood of upward mobility
27	4.13	Getting education to have access to networking opportunities because they play a significant part in business opportunities. Many networking partnerships are forged through people who attend college together

It is important to the participants that the most disenfranchised of the race receive access to better quality education. In addition, the most disenfranchised should be intentionally targeted to minimize the amount of social, political, and financial inequity they are challenged with. To the participants, this is the most pressing concern and value for upward mobility realization. They highly value improving the sociopolitical well-being of the entire Black population. The group also thinks that quality education is needed so that Black people can acquire access to the spaces where public policies are created. This value connects to the values related to *systemic accountability & change.* The participants do not think they should rely solely on an external entity, such as the government, to make the desired changes. They want all Black people to acquire the education to increase their ability and capacity to make systemic changes via policy and access to key social networks. Participants also placed ideas into this cluster that describe the kind of education they consider as quality. Quality education must include K-12 schools with adequate administrative, curricular, and financial resources. Another integral component of quality education participants communicated is culturally competent K-12 teachers whose pedagogies are free of limiting practices, believe in Black students' ability to have high academic performance, and have high expectations for the life outcomes of Black students.

The participants' third highest upward mobility value is **decreasing racial battle fatigue (cluster 6).** It has a value rating of 4.42. This cluster is located in the concept map thematic territory *systemic accountability & changes.* This thematic territory was highly salient in the

participants' upward mobility values, with multiple highly valued upward mobility clusters being located in this thematic area of the concept map. **Decreasing racial battle fatigue** included three ideations:

Table 7: Upward Mobility Cluster 6 Statements & Ratings

Statement Number	Rating	Statement
108	4.67	Decreasing the disproportionate number of Blacks negatively impacted by environment and access
43	4.53	Removing the inequities that require Black people to work harder and go through more "hoops" to be successful
104	4.07	Eradicating social injustices because protesting social injustices places unfair burden on the Black experience

The ideas participants grouped into this cluster convey that Atlanta's core Black middle class expends considerable physical and mental labor negotiating the effects of racialization. The negative effects of racialization impact their living environments, professional experiences, and sociopolitical lives. Although the participants are high achieving, they believe they have had to prepare more professionally to experience upward mobility. They believe that despite having acquired more credentials or experience to access particular professional opportunities, they are compensated similarly—sometimes less—than their counterparts of other races. In addition, to the effects of racialization in professional social arenas, participants must also contend with sociopolitical stressors such as Black-specific police brutality or voter disenfranchisement. While they believe that their individual social and economic condition is favorable, they are acutely aware of the areas of their lives and the lives of other Black people where the overall socio-political position of the Black race necessitates social protesting, community organizing, or grassroots activism. The mental, emotional, and physical burden of these dynamics is something all participants wanted to alleviate. They all believe that their capacity to experience upward mobility and build generational wealth is decreased because they must invest part of the resources they acquired from being upwardly mobile into countering racial strife. Decreasing

racial battle fatigue is integral in increasing upward mobility capacity and opportunity for Black people.

The fourth highest value and concern focused on creating stable class positionality. Participants believe **self-reliance through community collaboration (cluster 16)** is necessary for overall Black social mobility. This cluster is value-rated 4.42. Cluster 16 is located within the theme *collective sustainability*. The clusters within this theme showcase Atlanta's core Black middle class' values regarding the role of community in their success narratives and in improving the Black social condition. Participants in this study conceptualize self-reliance through community collaboration in three ways:

Table 8: Upward Mobility Cluster 16 Statements & Ratings

Statement Number	Rating	Statement
7	4.57	Increased numbers of capable Black community leadership
89	4.36	Building our own
17	4.33	Developing a community of people working toward a common goal of success

The participants highly value sustainable infrastructures that would result in persistent access to opportunity. Although the participants intend to hold government entities responsible for creating an equitable society, their upward mobility values suggest they also want to act within the Black community to create better life outcomes for all Black people. Black leaders are considered an important part of sustainable Black community infrastructures, especially within the context of upward mobility. The values within this cluster suggest that participants believe that working collaboratively within Black communities is essential to dismantling historically and systemically embedded racist practices; this must happen in addition to the governmental responsibilities they describe. In their view, attempting to work within the Black community is highly valued because they envision that there is a common goal to focus their efforts. In addition, in-group organizing means that motivation is higher because the outcomes of

collectively working on Black issues would benefit the sociopolitical reality for everyone involved. Working together in this manner would alleviate sole reliance on external efforts and resources often contingent upon the convergence of mainstream interests with the interests of the Black community.

Social Equality/Justice Cluster Map

The relationship between upward mobility and social equity/justice in the Black community is symbiotic. The highly rated clusters (containing five layers) were the same, with a few exceptions for each map. The value ratings of the conceptual clusters varied based on whether participants considered if the ideas of the cluster were critical for creating an equitable society or increasing upward mobility opportunities for Black people. The presence of the same clusters in the list of highly-rated clusters illustrates the sociopolitical and sociohistorical "cords" that construct the symbiotic relationships between success ideologies and social equity/justice ideologies in the Black community. Using a scale of 1 to 5, participants indicated how important or valuable each idea/statement is to them by considering, "*how much does the statement matter to creating an equitable society for Black people?"* As with the upward mobility map, more layers indicate a higher value rating, with five-layered clusters being the highest (see figure 6). Value ratings on the social equity/justice map ranged from 3.56 to 4.51. Five clusters with the highest value indicators—4.44 to 4.51—are discussed in detail. Five clusters are discussed because two clusters featured the same value rating. See Table 9 for the complete social equity/justice cluster list and average ratings.

Figure 6: Social Equity/Justice Values Map

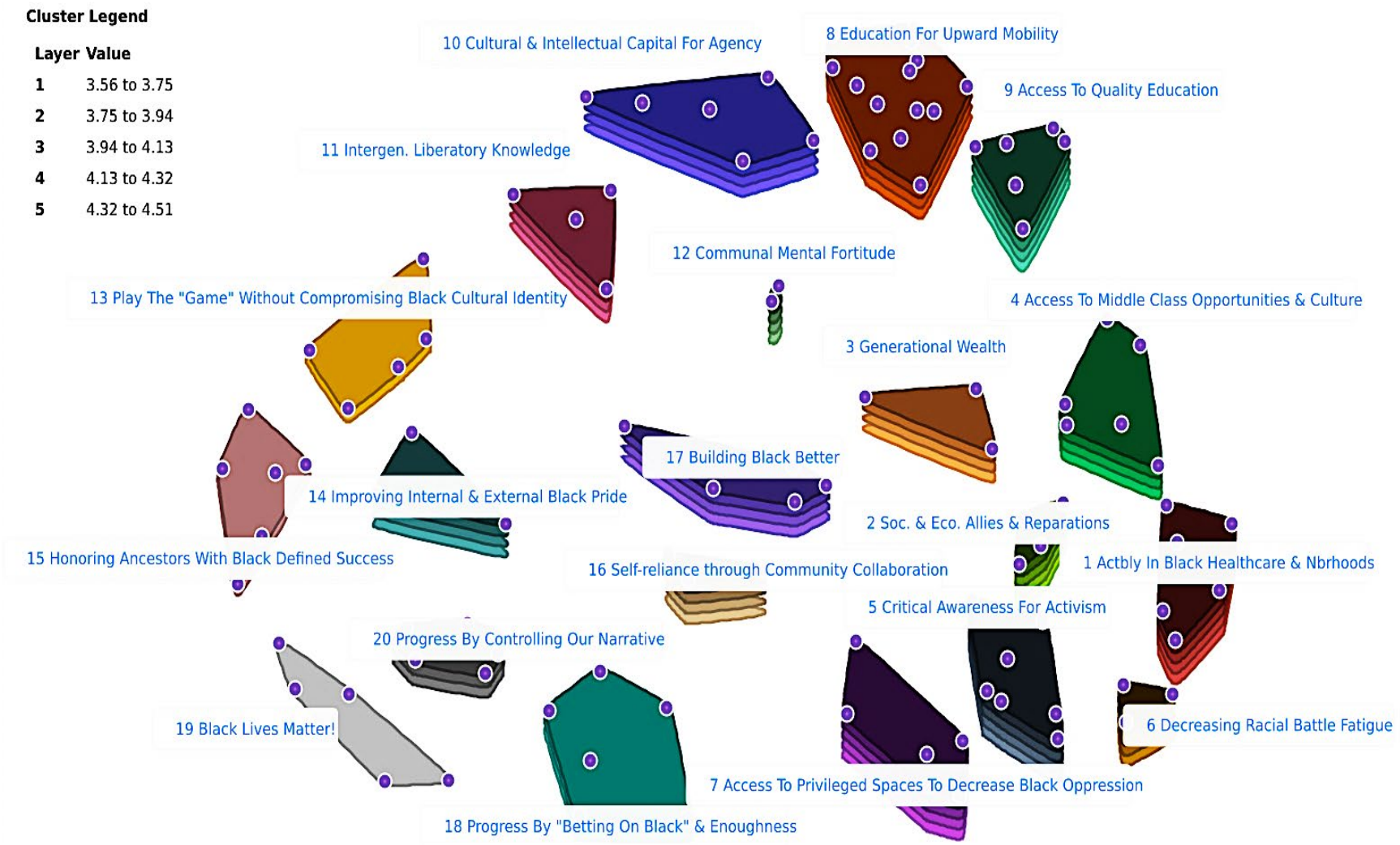


Table 9: All Social Justice & Equity Clusters & Value Ratings

Social Justice & Equity Values			
Value Rating	**Layers On Map**	**Cluster Number**	**Cluster Name**
4.51	5	6	Decreasing Racial Battle Fatigue
4.48	5	7	Access To Privileged Spaces To Decrease Black Oppression
4.46	5	1	Systemic Accountability In Black Healthcare &
4.44	5	9	Access To Quality Education
4.44	5	16	Self-Reliance Through Community Collaboration
4.40	5	5	Critical Awareness For Activism
4.38	5	2	Leveling Playing Field Via Social & Economic Allies and
4.37	5	12	Communal Mental Fortitude
4.31	4	3	Generational Wealth
4.30	4	4	Access To Middle-Class Opportunities & Culture
4.25	4	11	Intergenerational Liberatory Knowledge
4.24	4	10	Cultivating Cultural & Intellectual Capital For Agency
4.17	4	17	Building Black Better
4.16	4	14	Improving Internal & External Black Pride
4.14	4	8	Education For Upward Mobility
3.98	3	20	Fostering Progress By Controlling Our Narrative
3.95	3	18	Fostering Progress By "Betting On Black" & Enoughness
3.87	2	15	Honoring Ancestors With Black Defined Success
3.83	2	13	Play The "Game" Without Compromising Black Cultural
3.56	1	19	Black Lives Matter!

Participants believe that **decreasing racial battle fatigue (cluster 6)** is the most important to create the equitable society they desire. This cluster of ideas is value-rated 4.51. Just as with their primary value for upward mobility, this cluster of ideas is located within the concept map thematic territory of *systemic accountability & changes:*

Table 10: Social Equity/Justice Cluster 6 Statements & Ratings

Statement Number	Rating	Statement
43	4.67	Removing the inequities that require Black people to work harder and go through more "hoops" to be successful
108	4.33	Decreasing the disproportionate number of Blacks negatively impacted by environment and access
104	4.33	Eradicating social injustices because protesting social injustices places unfair burden on the Black experience

The individual value ratings shifted slightly from the social equity map, with the group believing it was most important to eradicate the sociopolitical issues they believe require them to work harder and go through more "hoops" to be successful. Within the context of social equity, the second concern in this cluster was environmental and access barriers. In upward mobility values, cluster 6 is third in priority. These variations in importance between contexts are nuances within

the groups' conceptual framework that are vital as they make the difference between solutions that dismantle inequity in manners that resonate with the people most impacted. The presence of this cluster of ideas in the participant's highest values concerning upward mobility and social equity underscores the need to investigate the experiences of this group. Although they are seemingly privileged because they experience success and achievement, their values indicate that they continue to experience emotional, physical, and mental stressors that mitigate the benefits of middle-class positionality. In addition, their privileges must be perceived through the sociopolitical reality they contend with. The presence of this cluster of ideas within the highest values regarding social mobility and equity concerns also calls the promises of a claimed meritocratic society into question. Atlanta's core Black middle class needs *systemic changes & accountability*, amongst other needs, to experience upward mobility based solely on their merits.

The second highest value regarding social equity/justice is **access to privileged spaces to decrease Black oppression (cluster 7)**. It is value-rated 4.48. Located within the thematic territory of *critical activism & lifting as we* climb, this cluster describes values regarding activism and improving the overall social condition of the Black race. The specific values of this cluster are:

Table 11: Social Equity/Justice Cluster 7 Statements & Ratings

Statement Number	Rating	Statement
56	4.73	Addressing the social inequities that cause poverty to continue and widen the socioeconomic divide
106	4.64	Alleviating persistent poverty that results in higher rates of crime in Black areas, over-policing, and police brutality
87	4.60	Increased diversity in areas and positions that have influence.
18	4.60	Having a seat at the "table" to be able to influence policy, funding, and help direct resources back to Black communities
88	4.20	Overcoming systemic boundaries that do not necessarily challenge Caucasian individuals
77	4.13	Social equity so that Black people don't always feel the pressure to keep achieving

Atlanta's core Black middle class is concerned with endemic poverty, police brutality, and influencing policy to direct resources into the Black community. While the group is focused on

their individual well-being and class luxuries, they appear to be acutely aware of the overall sociopolitical health of their community. Eradicating the oppressive systems that perpetuate socioeconomic disenfranchisement is one of the highest-rated values of the group. The other values in this cluster also suggest that they are concerned with poverty because they believe it begets other social injustices, such as over-policing, that increases the opportunity for incidents of police brutality. Though none in the participant group are currently contending with individual poverty, some are very familiar with the reality of poverty as they have family members who live different class realities; some also only recently began to experience middle-class stability. These values also suggest that this group does not value distancing from the overall Black experience. Instead, they aspire to leverage the privileges they can carve out to "lift as they climb." One way the group intends to do this is by aligning their upward mobility goals with their activism values and acquiring professional positions in spaces where they could influence the flow of resources into the communities that need them most.

Systemic accountability in Black healthcare and neighborhoods (cluster 1) is the group's third-highest social equity priority. This cluster is value-rated 4.46. In upward mobility values, this cluster is the highest valued. The presence of this cluster in the highest values within both contexts emphasizes how social justice/equity and upward mobility are interconnected concepts. Many of the needs of the participants in both areas are reliant upon each other for progress. When considering how the ideas of this cluster mattered for social equity, the group valued government-regulated accountability for removing barriers to upward mobility in general. The idea does not outline specific barriers that must be eradicated; suggesting that barriers are so pervasive, it becomes overwhelming to itemize each area of their experiences where they contend with social inequity. The severity, inescapability, and widespread impact of racially

motivated barriers on their overall quality of life also explain why participants insist that governmental authority dismantle the systems perpetuating inequity. The emphasis on governmental responsibility also suggests that participants believe racial inequities preclude civil liberties. The ideas grouped into this cluster also indicate that participants think that many social inequities are perpetrated and protected by governmental and public entities. The highest rated value in the cluster of ideas was written ambiguously to encompass the breadth of sociopolitical spaces where inequity transgressions occur; however, the group also named specific areas of concern within this cluster. The participants value decreasing criminal justice racialization that transpires through racial profiling and unfair sentencing because they believe it has negative implications for the overall stability of Black families. They also desire reforms that would target discriminatory practices in healthcare and food. Again, these values are the same concerns that trouble upward mobility experiences. The results illuminate important nuances about the most pressing concerns within specific contexts that bolster the possibility for social equity reform to identify solutions that can eliminate inequity in ways that this is meaningful and impactful to the populations most impacted. For example, a reform effort seeking to systemically increase social equity for Black people should prioritize criminal justice reform. In contrast, if a policymaker was focused on systemically increasing upward mobility opportunities, the results of this study indicate they should first target healthcare policies that ensure equitable access. However, to remove systemic barriers to upward mobility opportunities and decrease social inequities for Black people, governmental entities must target all values within the thematic territory of *systemic accountability and changes.* The specific social equity values of this cluster are listed in Table 12:

Table 12: Social Equity/Justice Cluster 1 Statements & Ratings

Statement Number	Rating	Statement
94	4.67	A government system of accountability being constructed to ensure that Blacks are able to achieve upward mobility and success
96	4.53	Countering the social norm of Blacks people disproportionately entering the criminal justice system due to racial profiling or receiving unfair sentencing and causing negative impacts to Black families
1	4.47	The system (public institutions/government regulations for private businesses) equally granting access to equitable healthcare to live longer lives
12	4.40	Decreased redlining in the homeownership process in specific areas
3	4.40	The system (public institutions/government regulations for private businesses) equally granting access to healthy natural environments
2	4.27	The system (public institution/government regulations for private businesses) equally granting access to healthy food

The conceptual cluster with the fourth highest value rating regarding social justice/equity is **access to quality education (cluster 9)**. It is value-rated 4.44. This cluster is within the thematic *territory critical and liberatory education for agency*. Although there are slight variations in the values of the specific ideas that comprise this cluster between upward mobility and social equity, the hierarchy of priorities is the same. Within both contexts, the primary value is to empower the most disenfranchised of the race through quality education and increased social, political, and financial equity. This finding underscores that Atlanta's core Black middle class is critically aware of the condition of the Black masses. In addition, their values and success ideologies include improving the overall Black condition. The presence of this cluster in the highest values for social mobility and social equity while also featuring the same order of priorities also emphasizes that the participant group thinks the same about the importance and role of education; it is a conceptual anchor in the success ideologies of the participants.

The social equity/justice map contained five highly ranked clusters because participants value the ideas of two conceptual clusters the same. **Self-reliance through community collaboration** (cluster 16) is value-rated 4.44 (the same as cluster 9) and is the fifth social equity priority of the group. The notable difference in values between social mobility and social equity

is what participants believe should be prioritized. Atlanta's core Black middle class believes community collaborations are most essential for improved social equity. Although Black leadership is valued and prioritized for upward mobility aspirations, social equity is perceived to be more about how the entire community can thrive. Toward the realization of that value, the two highest valued concerns in this cluster for social equity focus on internal organizing to change the overall sociopolitical condition:

Table 13: Social Equity/Justice Cluster 16 Statements & Ratings

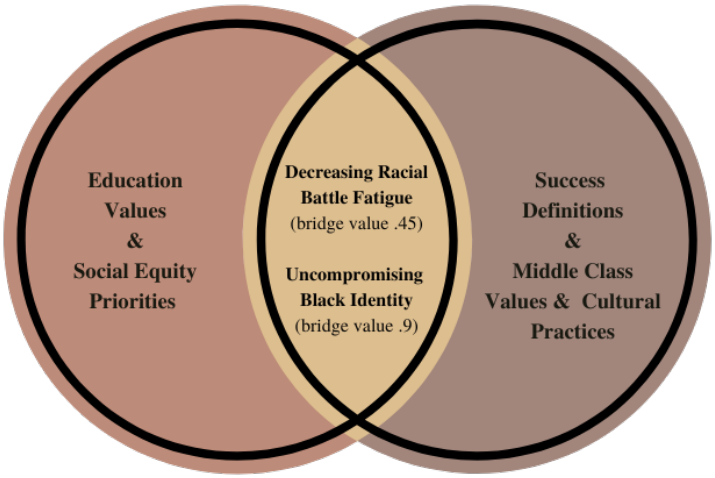
Statement Number	Rating	Statement
89	4.47	Building our own
17	4.47	Developing a community of people working toward a common goal of success
7	4.40	Increased numbers of capable Black community leadership

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the study. In Part I of the chapter, a thematic synthesis of the data findings is presented to answer each research question of the study. In Part II, the values for upward mobility and social justice/equity are discussed in detail. In both sections, the conceptual framework, depicted as a map, is presented with different analytical values overlain to illuminate the findings. The thematic territories of the map and themes from interviews describe the success ideologies, education priorities, class cultural practices, and social justice values of Atlanta's core Black middle class. Within each area of the conceptual framework, social justice concerns and priorities are present. Participants' conceptualization of success includes being able to achieve sans the constraints of racialization. Two of the primary achievement motivators are positioning themselves to leverage their privileges to counter social inequity and defining success in ways that are authentic to their cultural identity and honors their ancestors. Their class identities and cultural practices are heavily influenced by concerns of decreasing the effect of discrimination on all Black people and ensuring that their racial identity

is not suppressed. The participants also believe that education must intentionally make Black people aware of and prepare them to counter sociopolitical injustice and affirm their blackness. In essence, in each conceptual area—success ideologies, education values, class and cultural practices, and social justice priorities—**inhabiting their class positionality without compromising their Black cultural identities** and **decreasing racial battle fatigue** are salient values**.** These two concerns are thematic symbiotic cords that connect to each thematic territory and interview theme. Figure 7 is an illustration of this overall finding from the results.

Figure 7: Themes Overlap Diagram



GCM and phenomenological interviews were selected as data collection methods because centering the participants' voices in answering the research questions was paramount. Both data methods value voice. In each research phase, the participant co-constructors contributed their ideas, ways of thinking about the topics, values, and interpretation of the results. The research design intentionally minimizes researcher influence. The sequenced steps of GCM's rigorous integrated mixed-methodological design bolstered the findings' value, credibility, and legitimacy. This characteristic of GCM illustrates the appropriateness of GCM for this study (Kane & Rosas,

2014, p. 159). Semi-structured phenomenological interviews supplemented the findings from GCM to provide important context. Group Concept Mapping highlights the complex relationships between experiences, values, and conceptualizations that undergird the social phenomena being studied. The interviews aided in capturing the participant's narratives to further insights into the emerging complexities. The integrative nature of GCM encouraged intentional serendipity, theoretical creativity, and exploration of new ideas during the interviews (Brewer & Hunter, 2006). The interviews amplified the participant's voices further and crystalized the shared meanings that participants have formulated from their experiences of being upwardly mobile and core Black middle class.

It is hoped that these findings will: 1) expand the empirical research that furthers understandings of the complexities of the Black middle class; 2) equip policymakers and social reformists endeavoring to construct a more just society with more nuanced accounts of success and social justice; 3) shed light about the reality of upward mobility in seemingly privileged populations, thereby challenging notions of a meritocratic society; 4) illustrate the utility of combining concept mapping and phenomenological interviews to identify priorities in populations with histories of marginalization; and 5) present as a contemporary example of honoring scholar-ancestor and familial ancestors to continue the responsibility of racial uplift. In the next chapter, an interpretive discussion of these findings and the conclusion of this study are presented.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter juxtaposes contemporary understandings and themes about Atlanta's core Black middle-class with historical understandings. Each major theme that emerged in the data findings is discussed to highlight nuances and bring critical considerations forward. The discussions will also illuminate that the themes of *decreasing racial battle fatigue* and *being uncompromising in Black identity expression* thread throughout each area of the participants' ideologies. These two values are constantly present in the success and social justice conceptualizations of Atlanta's core Black middle class. Participants' class performances and cultural displays affirm the values of countering social inequity and being unapologetically Black. In addition, their achievement goals and class ideologies include decreasing the amount of physical, social, and emotional labor expended on countering racialization and systemic barriers that disproportionately impact Black lives. The participants' use of the phrase "racial battle fatigue" to describe the stress of constantly negotiating racial dynamics is aligned with social psychologist William Smith's race analysis paradigm and research about this phenomenon (2004, 2011). Smith describes racial battle fatigue as the "cumulative result of a natural race-related stress response to distressing mental and emotional conditions. [Racial battle fatigue] results from constantly facing racially dismissive, demeaning, insensitive and/or hostile racial environments and individuals" (Smith, 2008, p. 617; Goodwin, 2018).

The data results illustrate that these two themes create strong relationships between success conceptualizations, class values, education essentials, and social equity priorities. Although the interpretive discussions are organized by the themes that emerged during data analysis, the lines between thematic analyses are blurred at times. This is especially true with

regard to social justice values and priorities, as every component of the conceptual framework included a connection to the social equity needs of the participants. The connectedness of these themes makes it impossible to distill the social equity values from the other discussions. The constant presence of the priority of decreasing the burden of racialization emphasizes the problematic nature and dehumanizing effect of meritocratic discourses that tout that intelligence and hard work is solely responsible for upward mobility. The dehumanization of racialization is also a possible explanation for why Atlanta's core Black middle class insists on loudly asserting and affirming their humanity by not compromising their racial and cultural identity expressions. The pervasiveness of the deleterious effects of racism and discrimination in the lives of a group in American society who appear to be living proof of the promises of a meritocracy underscores the utility of critical race theory as an analytical lens. Without it, many of the nuances about the effects of racialization within the participants' narratives and the symbiotic relationships between emergent themes may not have been brought to the fore.

The values and ideologies expressed by Atlanta's core Black middle class indicate that the group is acutely aware of where their values and upward mobility journeys align and diverge from mainstream and contemporary achievement notions and ideals. The values captured in this study also strongly indicate that Atlanta's core Black middle class holds values historically grounded in the education, cultural, and social justice values that Carter G. Woodson and E. Franklin Frazier expressed. Their ideologies about education and the responsibilities of the Black middle class to the Black masses also express many of the ideals of W.E.B. Du Bois. The middle class' conceptual framework regarding upward mobility and social equity also includes some values that Frazier, Woodson, and Du Bois questioned. In the wake of the sociohistorical changes that have occurred since Woodson and Frazier challenged the Black middle class to be

socially responsible, it is imperative that sociological researchers respond to the nuances of contemporary sociopolitical realities in their research designs and questions. Critically considering the current sociopolitical context aids with understanding present-day values, practices, and beliefs and why they have come to exist.

Atlanta's Core Black Middle Class' Black American Dream

Extant literature regarding the Black middle class concludes that race sociologists seeking to advance Black middle-class research are challenged by findings from prior Black middle-class studies because the "use of alternative research definitions of middle-class… produce[s] varied findings" (Thomas, 2015, p. 200). New studies that fail to acknowledge the correlation between the definition employed and the results they conclude only muddy understandings and risk making cultural and social nuances within the Black middle class invisible (Claytor, 2019; Dickson & Marsh, 2008; Lacy, 2007; Marsh, 2011; Marsh et al., 2001; Marsh & Landry, 2011; Pattillo, 2007). Textured accounts of the Black middle-class offer the most promise in challenging meritocratic discourses and providing empirical context for policy improvements. Toward this research imperative, this study targeted an understudied sub-group of the Black middle class; the "core"(Lacy, 2007), and explicitly defined the middle-class group targeted for this study. The participants, people from Atlanta's core Black middle class, illuminated key beliefs and values that describe their version of the Black American Dream. The Black American Dream describes the group's success conceptualizations, which include values regarding class positionality and stability, professional goals and needs, income standards, and how they prefer to embody their blackness as they work to realize success. More simply, this theme's findings define what success means to Atlanta's core Black middle class.

Income & Professional Profile

The participants did not mince words in explaining that financial resources are critical to their conceptualization of what it means to be successful. While monetary accumulation was never framed as an ultimate goal, they believe it is necessary. For example, Mr. NC Psalm explained:

> I've found I was successful, when I felt like I could pay my bills every month. I feel successful when I don't have to ask any family member for money. That's a success. I don't care what anybody says, I want to be independent as much as I can.

In a different interview, Dr. MA Researcher stated:

> From a financial standpoint, I'd say success is that you're not worried, you know. You're not living to check to check, you're not on constant edge of how am I going to pay my basic bills. I think that's success. From the financial standpoint, success to me is, if something were to happen to my job today, I would not be panicked…I would be worried. I'd be concerned maybe, but I wouldn't be like, Oh my god, I'm gonna be homeless, or I don't know where my next meal is gonna come from.

Karyn Lacy's study *Blue-Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class* (2007) argues that middle-class Black people with the economic capacity to maintain stable class positionality have different middle-class experiences, values, and ideologies than those who are negotiating the dynamics of securing survival necessities. Her specific contention is that high-wage-earners:

> Are less likely to endure the chronic economic and social challenges of everyday life that many lower-middle-class [B]lacks experiences in their neighborhood settings…high-

> wage-earning [B]lacks are engaged in a different type of identity project than those who earn significantly less. (Lacy, 2007, p. 41)

A more recent exploration of Black middle-class identities, Claytor's *Black Privilege: Modern Middle-Class Blacks With Credentials and Cash to Spend* (2019), outlined middle-class behavioral practices and ideologies of Black middle-class people living in the New York City area. While Claytor's study did not utilize income in her definition of the middle class, her findings echoed Lacy's in that stably Black middle-class people earned high wages.

To participate in this study, participants had to earn between $50k - $100k annually. After completing the study, it was found that 31% of the people in this study earn between $76,000 and $99,999. In addition, 25% of the participants meet the definition of the upper middle class as defined by Lacy's 2007 study because they earn more than $100,000/annually. The Bureau of Labor Statistics provides context to understand why people who earn over $100k annually would be included in what Lacy previously defined as the core middle class. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation calculator, $1 in 2007 is equivalent in purchasing power to about $1.47 in 2022 in Atlanta, Georgia (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). On average, the prices throughout the U.S. are approximately 44% higher in 2022 than in 2007; the year Lacy published her study (Webster, 2022). CPI is "a measure of the average change over time in the prices paid by urban consumers for a market basket of consumer goods and services" (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). The income demographics of this study, analyzed within the context of present-day prices, suggest that it requires higher wages to experience stability in middle-class positionality. Atlanta's "blue-chips" might be more appropriately defined at a beginning annual salary range of $72,000 to $76,000

instead of $50,000. The study would likely have recruited more people with incomes over $100k if the recruitment guidelines had afforded this possibility.

A second finding that is more squarely aligned with past research is the absence of wealth in Atlanta's core Black middle class (Claytor, 2019; Lacy, 2007; Landry & Marsh, 2011). While the group expresses strong values for creating generational wealth and seeking the professional and business opportunities that will result in wealth creation, overall, wealth accumulation is mostly in the beginning stages for this group. Some of the values that support this finding are desires to have the income to financially support parents/family members, identifying homeownership as their most significant asset, and expressing the need to construct the social and political circumstances for future generations to create wealth. Despite this finding, the participants are extremely secure and positive about their financial futures. Claytor (2019) argues, "Blacks' financial optimism supports the idea that wealth is not critical to shaping how they *think* about their status as members of the middle class" (Claytor, 2019, p. 27).

Participants' incomes are generated from full-time employment. A third of the study group has positions at the director level, with slightly more people (50%) having positions at the managerial and entry-level. Although occupational prestige is often an earmark of class status, the participants in this study value income more than occupational prestige, as no one included their job level in their success definitions. The low emphasis on job level could be the result of prestigious positions historically discriminating against Blacks being able to acquire them. However, it could also suggest that the Black middle class has a very different ideological makeup about what constitutes class status. When prestigious positions were discussed in interviews or concept mapping, they were discussed to highlight the resources that are located in these social spaces that they believe aid with constructing a more egalitarian reality. Participants

do not view prestigious positions as part of what constitutes their class positionality. In addition, the study group strongly believes that college education is more of a modifier of class status than career achievement. This finding suggests that combining income with education (Claytor, 2019) better defines core middle-class people in Atlanta, Georgia.

Neighborhood

Spatial location is a contentious social topic when it comes to class, privilege and who has a right to the most valuable geographic locations in a city (Buras, 2015; Pattillo, 1999, 2013, 2007; Robinson & Simonton, 2019). The geographic/home location of the Black middle class is also a popular focus area for studies of Black class politics. Researchers have sought to determine if the Black middle class lives adjacent to poor Black neighborhoods, in working-class White neighborhoods, or enclaves of other middle-class Blacks (Pattillo, 2007; Lacy, 2007; 2012; Meltzer, 2016). This study specifically focused on the Black middle class located in Atlanta, Georgia because of Atlanta's unique history of attracting Black people who desire upward mobility (Guynn & Ellis, 2019; Hobson, 2018; Sasso, Matthews & Newkirk, 2019). Neighborhood quality and location preferences are a component of the conceptual framework and were frequently discussed during interviews. Within the conceptual framework, some of the values related to neighborhood quality and location included: “alleviating persistent poverty that results in higher rates of crime in Black areas, over policing, and police brutality;” “increasing neighborhood equality because quality education [is] influenced by zip code;” and “decreased redlining in the homeownership process in specific areas.” In his interview, Mr. Buckhead Bougie explained:

> When you're in the middle class, you have first of all more of a selection on where you live. I think that people that are in like, you know, in a lower class or you know, poverty

> type situation, don't really have a choice on where you live, you have to sort of live where you can afford. It's kind of the same for the middle class, also, but we just have a different set of criteria. I can actually…live almost anywhere I want to in Atlanta. I basically have my pickings.

Mr. Ohio Engineer discussed the considerations he had to make when selecting an area to build his home. He explained that he could move to areas—such as Cobb County—with better quality school systems than other areas of metro Atlanta; however, he would have had to compromise house size and features. He explained:

> I'm in South Fulton County…South of the airport. I would have loved to have gone to Cobb County. I'm not saying that where I live is terrible. It's just the schools aren't the best. But the house is in the perfect location, literally. Ten minutes from Atlanta's airport. So if I ever wanted to sell this house, it would sell fairly quickly.

The values that emerged during the neighborhood discussions of the participants indicate how important neighborhood choice is to middle-class identities. The discussions also allude to the controversial topic of Atlanta's "race and place" politics.

Mr. Ohio Engineer's challenges with finding a neighborhood that had all of the characteristics he values—home size, safety, location, and quality schools—echo historians and sociologists who critique the city's economic and political agendas. Several scholars have extensively detailed Atlanta's problematic history of displacing its Black residents to reclaim urban spaces to gentrify for neoliberal and political agendas that directly aimed to disenfranchise Black voters (Hobson, 2017; Robinson & Simonton, 2019; Pierannuzi & Hutcheson, 1990). These agendas leave some of the most prized geographic areas in Metro Atlanta overly saturated with non-Black residents. Despite this, it was relatively easy to find participants who fit the

study's criteria of living within Atlanta proper city limits. However, to ensure that the participant group was representative of men and women, the participation criteria was expanded to include people throughout metro Atlanta. 81% of the participants live within the Atlanta proper city limits. It must also be noted that 63% of the participants were "transplants" or non-natives of the city. The high percentage of transplants is noteworthy because it supports research (Hobson, 2017, 2018; Stokes, 2018; Sasso, Matthews & Newkirk, 2019) which states that the city aims to attract Black professionals from other places that align with the "Black Mecca" image while simultaneously marginalizing a considerable portion of its native Black citizenry because they do not neatly fit into the city's neoliberal and political branding.

Despite this problematic context, the study illustrates that a significant population of core Black middle-class people resides within the prized geographic location called "ITP" (in the perimeter). Atlanta is a city that is marginally predominately Black—49.8%. The second largest race group is White (40.4%) (U.S. Census, 2020). The White/Black dissimilarity index, a measure of the "[W]hite people that would need to move to another neighborhood to make [W]hites and [B]lacks evenly distributed across all neighborhoods," is 83.5%. In Georgia, Atlanta is the most racially segregated city (Frey & Meyers, 2000). These findings suggest that many of the people included in this study more than likely live alongside other Black residents or in racially diverse areas that are majority White (Meltzer, 2016). According to sociologist and demographer, Albie Clayton of Clark Atlanta University:

> Black families in Atlanta prefer to live in mostly [B]lack enclaves such as south DeKalb, south Fulton, and Clayton counties. Many [B]lacks now live in Atlanta's suburbs, where they can get more house for their money, rather than the city. (Meltzer, 2016)

She explains that segregation is voluntary as people want to raise families in areas where they and their children feel most comfortable.

Others seem to believe that emergent Black middle classers may be more likely to move to areas where their homes are more of an investment. Mr. Ohio's Engineer alluded to this in his comments about his home location. Dr. Louis Sullivan, founding Dean of Morehouse School of Medicine and current President Emeritus, believes that the choice of where to live in Atlanta is based on where people—despite race—can afford a home versus concern about White resentment. In addition, a home in a more racially diverse area affords more opportunities for resale in the future (Meltzer, 2016). The study participants are largely single people who live alone. Dickson & Marsh (2008) identified this demographic trend in a journal article titled "The Love Jones Cohort: A New Face of the Black Middle Class." Marsh et al. (2007) also discussed this trend in a journal article titled "The Emerging Black Middle Class: Single and Living Alone." For the participants in this study, the findings from these prior studies might better explain their neighborhood location. The number of participants who are single and without dependents might mean that the participants are more likely to select home locations based on the needs of a single person without children. Homeownership was identified as the most valuable asset for the participants in this study. Purchasing a home that could withstand recession downturns and provide a possible source of wealth could also inform why the study participants elect to reside ITP. In addition, some study participants expressed that they appreciate living in their respective locations because of the amenities that are present.

Uncompromising Blackness in Success

The success ideologies of the participants in this study group are the location of the most noticeable presence of double consciousness. While participants seem to have moved beyond

warring between internalizations of external negative perceptions of Black identities and their own positive perceptions of their racial identities, their professional identities existed in a more problematized state. Some participants explained that they intentionally elect to wear their hair in dreadlocks to signal the saliency of their racial identity within White dominant spaces. Others explained that they understand that although they possess the credentials, their lighter complexion makes them seem less threatening to their White counterparts and could have possibly contributed to their professional achievements. Many participants discussed how they must be "Black, but not too Black" in their professional spaces. The concept of being "Black, but not too Black" is deconstructed in Adia Wingfield's, professor of Sociology at Washington University, article titled “Being Black—but Not Too Black—in the Workplace” (2015). Wingfield states that people attempt to attribute differences in racial outcomes to poverty, however:

> For [B]lacks in professional positions, issues of poverty are not the problem. Poverty does not explain biases in hiring, the need for particular types of emotional management, and the careful self-presentation that minority professionals engage in at work. [There must be] a rethinking of some of the existing efforts to create more diverse work environments. Do diversity and inclusion initiatives take into consideration how minorities placed in those environments feel? How can policies create not just more equitable hiring processes, but address the emotional toll of being a racial minority in a professional work setting?

Participants describe their system of emotional and cultural negotiation strategies employed in the workplace as "playing the game" (cultural reflexivity). Despite leveraging cultural reflexivity tools, participants place a high value on being authentic to their culture and racial identity in

mainstream spaces. All participants refuse to engage in practices that require them to distance themselves from blackness for success. However, they are acutely aware of the ways in which perceptions of their race impacts their upward mobility opportunities. The dynamic between identity values and workplace values is where double-conscious issues are negotiated. Participants value being able to critically define their own definitions of success and de-centering mainstream success definitions. At the same time, they want the education and opportunity to develop the skills required to acquire mainstream markers of success because these spaces harbor resources such as cultural, social, and economic capital. Ultimately, the study group wants to be relieved of the burden of having to contend with these two realities. The people of the study explained that they want "inequities that require Black people to work harder and go through more "hoops" to be successful removed" and "to be valued as a collective to achieve more in the workplace." Participants' workplace tensions and negotiations contribute to their "racial battle fatigue." Although participants are not internalizing external perceptions, they are not yet free of the mental fatigue of wading through these perceptions and their impacts. The ultimate success for the study participants is being freed of this struggle, embodying their racial identities without compromise, and experiencing upward mobility without limitations.

The study participants, like Black middle-class populations throughout the nation, are the children of parents who were the first to benefit from the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In addition, they have also been able to benefit from the cultural infusions of the Black Power Movement that began in the 1960s and was heightened in the 1990s:

> For members of the contemporary [B]lack middle-class, the idea that [B]lack's cultural heritage and their racial cultural distinction should be celebrated has become increasingly

> normalized…ideas about the value and utility of [B]lack culture, for many, are deeply infused in their lifestyle. (Claytor, 2019, p. 23)

Although their blackness is unapologetically present, a function of their privilege was knowing when and how to engage others with their racial and cultural identities. Their success experiences require that they navigate divergent "social, cultural, and institutional spaces. [While they were] unapologetically [B]lack, they also [had to] maintain a cultural repository [that granted them] continued access and acceptance into a wider world that values and idealizes dominant culture" (Claytor, 2019, p. 56).

Black, Bougie, & Decreasing Racial Battle Fatigue

Bourgeois Identities

The Black people who participated in this study described standards they hold regarding middle-class behaviors and cultural nationalism. The group expressed their class and cultural identities through social practices, consumptive choices, and equity values. Although the group shares many characteristics with Black middle-class populations discussed in contemporary studies, the study group also displayed characteristics unique to their geographic location—Atlanta, Georgia. The social and racial identities that are documented in this study undergird an important finding that future inquiries of Black class dynamics must intentionally consider when identifying research questions, theoretical framings, and methodological designs: "[B]lacks' aesthetic preferences and values are not static. They are informed by traditions, but they are also modified in response to the contemporary cultural moment" (Claytor, 2019, p. 38). Evidence of the dynamic nature of Black values is that there are instances where individuals communicated values that appear to be in a liminal space as they grapple with aligning individual ideologies with collective values captured in the conceptual framework. For example, some participants do

not find it important to acknowledge or intentionally focus on honoring ancestors in their individual values. However, they understand this concept's overall importance and value to the Black collective. In addition to this, location matters. The manner in which the participants in this study occupied "middle class" might contrast in notable ways from a Black middle-class population in another geographic location. The options for identity expressions and consumptive preferences, primary methods for identity expression, are oftentimes contingent upon geographic availability and trends.

Black class studies of the early to mid-twentieth century documented and critiqued the respectability politics displayed by a large majority of the Black middle class (Landry, 1987). Some of Woodson's (1933) and Frazier's (1957) critiques admonished the ways that upwardly mobile Blacks "upheld racialized norms that favored [W]hite cultural tastes and traditions over [B]lack cultural tastes and traditions with the goal of being seen as social equal as [W]hites" (Claytor, 2019, p. 38). At other times, Frazier frowned upon the emergent Black middle class for not assimilating into respectability culture. These norms often included "decorous" behavioral practices. While the participants do not explicitly communicate that they want to distance themselves from the Black masses, there are some middle-class behavioral understandings that could exclude Black people who do not have access to the social or professional spaces to cultivate the cultural capital to use the cultural reflexivity that undergirded many of these behaviors. The concept mapping data collection was not designed to capture this kind of information; however, during some interviews, participants explained how middle-class identities include income and behavioral standards. For example, Mr. Buckhead Bougie stated, “it's more of a, not money thing, it's more of how you act. I do think that there is a behavior thing [to middle class], a cultural thing." Ideas were expressed about differences in the kinds of

entrepreneurial accomplishments of stable middle-class people and the ways in which education is a key component for developing middle-class tastes and affinities. Dr. MA Researcher split the middle class into two segments: the income-only middle class and the educated and income middle class. From her perspective, each middle-class segment had different professional and entrepreneurial identities. Participants also explained what constituted middle-class social etiquette, language, and leisure and luxury preferences. For example, Mr. Buckhead HR Bougie elaborated on the topic by explaining:

> If I knew of a blue collar worker, who's making a lot of money. They have a trade, but they're making a lot of money….but they're just not into stuff. Not well spoken, can't write well, not good at communicating…maybe verbally, but definitely not good at communicating via writing. They just live a regular life. I would see that differently than middle class.

His perception is that the middle class includes particular class tastes and skills, often resulting from middle-class socialization. Participants described lifestyle choices that affirm and maintain their class status and identities; however, they also engage in practices that demonstrate the salience of their Black cultural nationalism. Claytor (2019) explains that these middle-class displays are functions of middle-class Black privilege. They extend beyond simple code-switching:

> Middle-class Blacks must read and respond to social and cultural cues to gain acceptance in different social situations. Using their diverse cultural repertoires, they draw upon and display…different demeanors, behaviors, composures, knowledge bases, and even emotion, all with the goal of being understood and recognized…they are demonstrating

> an ability that relies on their cultural flexibility…drawing on their Black privilege. (Claytor, 2019, p. 4)

Despite expressing no explicit desire to separate from the Black masses, many of the ideas communicated about middle-class culture are products of privileges that serve as an invisible line of class separateness. In essence, these performances of privilege could separate those that are "Black and bougie" from those who are not.

Interviewees and many of the concept-mapping participants discussed their attraction to the word "bougie" in the recruitment flyer and how it impacted their decision to participate. During interviews, participants were asked to comment specifically about the middle-class culture of Atlanta, Georgia. Their answers described the many ways they engage with their class positionality from a socially aware, at times critical, standpoint. While they communicated class values informed by their Black privileges, they also explained that Atlanta's Black and bougie population possesses some problematic standards that should be questioned, and at times, challenged. For example, one participant explained how Atlanta is a city ripe with "hustle mentality" because everyone desires success. However, some of the business opportunities can be predatory, especially for those without the professional skills that are more likely to be present in college-educated middle-class populations. Dr. MA Researcher explained:

> It is called multi level marketing…I think a lot more people are getting into those, which are somewhat predatory sometimes. Some people have been successful at it and enjoy it. …but to me, I would say it's a lower middle class or [a] lower than middle class type of businesses. Then there's, the traditional [entrepreneur choices] that people are just doing what they do anyway… they're just doing it on their own. Whether it's hair or nails or

> service industries, or car repairs. Then the businesses in the education middle class is more like being a consultant. Like what I do… I can market myself in a different way.

She went on to explain that the culture of Black success in Atlanta is also rife with superficial ideals of status and individualism rather than community:

> Everybody's an individual. It's not really like community as much. And the communities that do this, I don't hang with those people, because they're not in that socioeconomic status group that I'm in. A lot of times, this person came five years ago, this person came three years ago…it's not like this community where there's lots of existing ties to each other, if that makes sense. Overall it's good, but I think that there's a lot of the fronting and the status…this is what you need to do, and this is how much money I have.

Despite almost all interview participants describing and grappling with this social reality of the Black Mecca, they also voiced that Atlanta is an ideal location to reside.

Derrick Bell, one of the most preeminent critical race scholars, provided a different perspective for understanding the class schisms that occur when a portion of the Black population experiences upward mobility while another experiences slow or stagnate mobility. In his book *Faces At the Bottom of The Well* (1992), he presented a series of stories illuminating the permanence of racism, a critical tenet of critical race theory. In a dialogue with a character by the name of Mr. Semple, Bell dissected the divisions between upper/middle and working/poor Blacks. During the dialogue, Bell stated that the Black masses are too hard on Blacks who managed to "get degrees and what [they] called a bourgeois lifestyle" because ultimately all Black people were still subjected to racial discrimination and therefore in the "same boat." Mr. Semple and Bell then proceeded to process that idea:

> Semple said. “I mean no offense, but the fact is you movin’-on-up [B]lack folks hurt us everyday [B]lacks simply by being successful. The [W]hite folks see you doing your thing, making money in the high five figures, latching on to all kinds of fancy titles, some of which even have a little authority behind the name, and generally moving on up. They conclude right off that discrimination is over, and that if the rest of us got up off our dead asses...we would all be just like you. “It’s not fair, brother, but it’s the living truth. You may be committed to [B]lack people but, believe me, you have to work very hard to do as much good for [B]lack people as you do harm simply by being good at whatever you do for a living!” “That’s a pretty heavy burden to hang on anybody,” I suggested... I assume," I added, "that you don't include Dr. King in your condemnation." "Man, get it straight," Semple replied. "I don't include anyone! It's the [W]hite folks who make these conclusions. We [B]lack folks, working-class and upper-class, simply have to live with them. (pp. 33-34)

This perspective is an important consideration when analyzing the social identities of middle-class Blacks. The perceived class rifts must be appropriately understood as a symptom of the ills of racism. While individuals are burdened with the responsibility of cultural reflexivity to maintain their cultural and professional ties, hegemonic processes ultimately create the conditions for class divides. Another aspect of racial battle fatigue is that one's upward mobility is also weaponized to condemn those unable to struggle out of oppression. This perspective of class division adds another dimension to the problems of merit-based achievement in Black populations. It also accurately labels the "culprit"/cause of Black class fissures. Some perspectives blame middle-class Blacks for distancing despite their loud proclamations and actions to the contrary. Bell's dialogue aids with understanding that Black people, no matter the

class, are all fighting the same villain. Although the villain may be the same, the method of attack differs based on class positionality.

ATLiens and transplants explained that the Black popular culture of Atlanta was one of its most attractive characteristics, especially for middle-class Blacks. Despite critiques of material superficiality or lack of community, they believe they can engage with, consume, and produce Black cultural aesthetic in organic and authentic manners. Mr. NC Psalm explained how the city offers it "all":

> There is a social life here. That's awesome. Quality of life...career wise, there are many opportunities for Black Americans to delve into…all the way from education to entertainment. I happen to do both worlds. There is a sense of Black excellence in the Cascade area, Camp Creek, and the West End area. In the areas that I just listed, these are large communities where Blacks have lived for years and decades. The quality of life there is middle class or upper middle class. There's also a sense of pop Black culture or Black popular culture. We have the Atlanta Housewives or Basketball Wives, Love and Hip-Hop Atlanta…media. Hip-hop lives here. Hollywood lives here. You can either pop bottles every night, or you can pop bottles on the weekends and then work through the week.

The options available to the Black middle class epitomize the Black Mecca image. Though laced with myth and reality regarding the possibilities for upward mobility for Black people, Atlanta remains to be an ideal location to explore the complexities of Black middle-class life.

The Politics of Race & Class

Atlanta's core Black middle class highly values their Black identities and culture. This is evidenced by the priority the group gives to inhabiting an uncompromising Black identity. Class

mobility and opportunities are desired for multifaceted reasons; however, the participants do not value distancing from Black culture or the Black masses. They report being extremely proud of their culture and actively seek ways to consume it. Instead of upward mobility and status being a vehicle for distancing or a social avenue for assimilating into majoritarian society, participants of this study report that class opportunities are desired because they provide the resources to embody the identities, social behaviors, and consumptive practices they value. Although upward mobility is a desire, the middle class in this study does not want class opportunities at any cost. The cluster with the strongest symbiotic connection with all areas of the conceptual map is **"play the 'game' without compromising Black cultural identity**." Participants know they are navigating social, political, and professional spaces that often do not readily welcome Black people or Black cultural expression. The ideas of this cluster also illustrate that participants understand that their upward mobility goals and trajectories necessitate an association with and successfully navigating social relationships within White/mainstream society. "Playing the game" means that participants understand there are some social and class spaces that necessitate they demonstrate cultural similarity in terms of class and other settings where they must demonstrate cultural similarity in terms of race by demonstrating that they are immersed in a Black cultural and racial identity. Claytor's (2020) study, *Black Privilege: Modern Middle-Class Blacks With Credentials and Cash to Spend*, discusses finding the same behavioral practices in the Black middle-class group of her study. She describes cultural flexibility/reflexivity (playing the game) as a class resource that is indubitably honed by penetrating class settings where pervasive racism and anti-blackness result in the underrepresentation of Black people (Claytor, 2020, pp. 11-13). Members of the Black middle class of her study and this study are critically aware of two factors as they navigate their middle-class experiences: 1) racism and anti-

blackness are permanent phenomena in their lives, and 2) the merits of their academic and professional achievements do not result in the same privileges as class counterparts from different racial groups. These two factors mean that they must leverage unique social/cultural skills to enjoy their middle-class privileges. Although privileges are present, they are truncated by the impact of pervasive societal racism.

Truncated privilege for the Black middle class takes on a variety of forms. In professional spaces, truncated privileges look like being promoted to a high-wage and prestigious position but being compensated less than counterparts of other races despite being as or more qualified. In social spaces, diminished privileges entail being able to afford to live in a safe neighborhood with nice properties and amenities but having little home equity because home values are lower in predominately Black areas of the city. Another example is having the resources to pay for private school education; however, your children face racial bullying and social isolation because they are a minority in the school. While more privileged with opportunities and resources than lower-class Black people, the effects of American racialization attenuate the middle-class privileges of the Black middle class.

Differing from the Black middle class Frazier described, the participants do not desire to assimilate or acquire acceptance into mainstream spaces at the cost of their blackness. Participants value “knowing how to exist in ‘their’ world” and “taking advantage of resources and opportunity our ancestors fought for us to have.” Upward mobility is also valued because participants believe it to be a key component in dismantling inequity. The conceptual framework's upward mobility and social equity values illustrate that upward mobility motivations and values are inextricably linked to countering inequality to improve social conditions for the Black race and the following generations. The participants’ values do not

indicate that they believe that they could achieve their way out of oppression, desire to assimilate into the White culture of privilege, or that they would rise the ranks out of destitute blackness. On the contrary, the conceptual framework demonstrates that the study group proudly associates with their ancestral histories and feels a moral obligation to continue to resist injustices. One idea communicated by the group is “making our ancestors proud by understanding and appreciating that they fought and died for us to have a better life.” In addition to honoring the historical advancements of previous Blacks, the group expressed that they desire for “Black families [to be] able to define success in ways that do not look to Whiteness as their standard." The participants desire Black defined success wherein they do not have to navigate the politics of race and class. The existence of these values indicates that the promises of meritocracy are problematically realized for upwardly mobile Blacks. Merit alone does not result in mainstream success. They must also cultivate the cultural reflexivity tools to be successful in their class positions. In addition, their success conceptualizations are strongly interconnected to social equity concerns to the point that many of their achievement goals are the same as their social equity goals.

The class values of the group also include appreciation for material accumulation, middle-class behavioral practices, enjoyment of class privileges, and cultural consumption that promotes racial solidarity. In interviews, participants explained that they desire lives of luxury and having the financial resources to buy what they please, vacation where they desire, and acquire the social resources to cultivate the social capital that aided with maintaining their class positions. The concept map cluster titled **“access to middle-class opportunities and culture”** contains two ideas that reflect the lifestyle and materialistic values of the group. The ideas are 1)“having access to the resources that afford access to middle-class life and maintaining that

class position" and 2) "knowing how to access the same or better experiences as non-Blacks." Many of the middle-class values and desires of the group do not differ from what many Americans desire; however, their class values also include factors of racialization. A key characteristic of their upward mobility narratives is being aware of the precarious nature of their class positions. Their ability to remain stably middle class is only possible if they can continually access the resources they are oftentimes intentionally denied. To gain access, participants must be critically aware of how racialization manifests in different contexts and then determine the best way around barriers. Participants were never free of using their cultural reflexivity tools, thinking about how to leverage their privileges for racial uplift, or considering how to get past discrimination barriers that limit upward mobility trajectories. As a result, the group's equity values include countering constraints to the class experiences they had been able to access. For example, they valued "increasing neighborhood equality because quality education was influenced by zip code." Neighborhood equality includes equal access to prime geographic locations in the city, high property values, quality schools, access to food desert-free areas, and safety from crime and over-policing, which results in more opportunity for police brutality. The study group recognizes that they enjoy the materialism that is possible because of middle-class salaries and social exposure. However, they were also aware that their lifestyle choices are only possible insofar as their truncated privileges could maintain. In spite of this constant understanding, most participants proudly discussed how they enjoy being able to purchase luxury items and experiences such as clothing, cars, or international trips. In addition, many expressed their commitment to racial uplift by "buying Black." Claytor (2020) connects "buying Black" to the racial ideology of Black Nationalism. She explains:

> Consistent with the tenets of [Black] Nationalism, middle-class [B]lacks articulate that keeping money in the community is a way to retain [B]lack control over economic resources, to contribute to the current and future success of [B]lack entrepreneurs, and to ensure that their specifically Black tastes and needs as consumers are met. (p. 130)

Some participants not "buy Black" because they believe that Black businesses could not compete with mainstream companies' product availability and competitive cost. While others expressed that they are indifferent about the spending practice of "buying Black." All participants expressed that they view their ability to spend discretionary income as a critical component of their middle-class identities. Those who do not necessarily feel driven to "buy Black" expressed that they ultimately value having the financial resources to consume as they see fit. The findings, most importantly, reveal that their material consumption cannot be divorced from the politics of racialization. In addition they illustrate how, the realities of their racialized experiences are a constant factor within their consumptive practices, whether explicit or implicit.

The class values expressed in the conceptual framework do not align with the claim that middle-class Blacks are devoid of cultural roots and suffer from an inferiority complex. On the contrary, they insist on proudly associating with Black culture and racially identifying. The sociopolitical, historical, and economic changes since Frazier's 1957 study present a different contextual frame and therefore capture a distinctive set of contemporary education, class, and social justice values. The level of public integration of the Black race—evidenced by figures such as Oprah Winfrey, Barack Obama, and Kamala Harris —is a different social and political reality than Frazier's writings in the 1950s. The fact that this study is conducted in the sociopolitical climate of an American public with a newly energized focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) reform is also proof-positive that this study investigated within

a different social landscape than even those sociological inquires of class and race that have been conducted in the past 20-30 years. The current social and political hyper-focus on expanding DEIB efforts is arguably the result of a history of horrendous acts of racial violence and discrimination (Collantes, 2020; Goodman, 2020). For example, ten years ago, the unpunished murder of Trayvon Martin was met with racial protests and civil unrest. However, a super-charged shockwave was sent throughout America as a result of the filmed public murder of George Floyd. This incidence of racially charged police brutality re-catalyzed the focus on racial equity reform (Gaudiano, 2002; Toll, 2022). Occurrences such as these make for a different sociopolitical context to examine the education and social justice values of the Black middle class.

Frazier details in chapter five of *Black Bourgeoisie: Middle-Class Blacks in America* (1957) that the emergent Black middle class had failed to adhere to their traditional cultural background, resulting in a lack of purpose, positive identity formation, and an obsession with elusive White assimilation. Frazier labeled two Black cultural traditions: 1) the genteel tradition breed largely out of the mulatto class whose patterns of behavior were associated with the ideal of the southern lady or gentleman, and 2) the folk tradition that was associated with the church, acceptance of the "negro fate," and the struggle to make a living in a White dominated world (Frazier, 1957, pp. 113-119). The emergent middle class did not embody either of these traditions. According to Frazier, this resulted in an immoral existence, a severe inferiority complex, self-hatred, and a hatred of the Black masses (Frazier, 1957, pp. 213-232). Despite boasting of achievements, emergent middle-class Blacks desired to be White and constructed a world of "make believe" to compensate for their dissonance. In this discussion, I will not engage in a baseless social science faux pas of arguing that E. Franklin Frazier "got it wrong or right."

Instead, the argument is that social construction and historization must always be critical considerations in studies of racial dynamics. The middle-class values of this study's conceptual framework are undeniably influenced by the social justice realities that have existed and are being created. The middle class of Frazier's investigation was in its infancy and grappling with the reality of severe denial of civil rights. Present-day equity conditions still leave a lot to be desired; however, the lived experiences of Black people have significant differences. There is now public racial integration, discrimination has been deemed illegal, and Black people can generally work to achieve their goals as they see fit. While it has been argued that Frazier did not capture the full cultural reality of the emergent Black middle class of his time, ample research also documents and provides explanations for what Frazier so audaciously called to the fore. For example, Landry's 1987 work details how early twentieth-century middle-class Blacks distanced themselves from the Black lower class as an exercise of assimilation. Other sociological and historical studies detail the dynamics of respectability politics that were exhibited by elite, upper, and middle-class Black people with the hopes of being seen as social equals to their White counterparts. Those who did not live the realities of those times often frown upon these actions; however, the actions were often not about coveting White culture. Respectability politics were an exercise of humanity and dignity in response to long-standing stigmatization (Cole & Omari, 2003; Harris, 2003; Reed & Gaines, 1998). Despite the differences in sociohistorical contexts, the profound work of Frazier's study still haunts sociological and public perceptions of the Black middle class. As such, it is important to critically engage with his ideas in contemporary discussions of Black middle-class understandings. The findings of this study are a compelling contemporary exploration of the current state of Black middle-class values. While it is unknown what Frazier would think of the contemporary Black middle class, it must be highlighted that

some of their cultural practices perpetuate the respectability politics Frazier valued; while other beliefs intentionally denounce respectability constraints. For example, electing to wear natural hairstyles that are deemed unprofessional or insisting on Black cultural expression being a part of professional identities challenge the traditional notions of respectability. The findings of this study also emphasize the need for research questions and methodologies seeking to understand the Black middle class to continually respond to the evolution of the group and the sociocultural context in which it must negotiate.

A Critical & Liberatory Education = Educated Negroes

In addition to Frazier's arguments about social class, I explored the educational values of the study group. Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-education Of The Negro* (1933) and W.E.B Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) are essential historical works that aid with highlighting key aspects of the group's conceptual framework regarding education. The education standards of Atlanta's core Black middle class are multifaceted. While education is valued as a virtuous accomplishment, the participants minced no words in communicating that it is also valued because they view it as the main vehicle for upward mobility in American society. The correlation that participants link between upward mobility and social equity also explains why participants believe that education is a foundational factor in increasing social equity. Education is a social space where Black people have been systemically discriminated against, perpetuating countless negative impacts on their life outcomes. A fifth of the clusters constituting the conceptual framework is focused on education. The ideas expressed in the clusters illustrate two important findings. The first finding is that the study group identifies similar critiques as Woodson in *The Mis-education of the Negro* (1933*)* regarding the current quality of Black education. The second conclusion is that the highly educated in this study practices the education

values Woodson communicated. The study group wants education to construct critical awareness in their peer group and in younger generations, which would result in activism. Education is also desired for upward mobility and to construct Black definitions of success. Quality education is cherished because it is essential for policy influence, cultural capital accumulation, intellectual development, and agency over their individual and collective survival. Participants also communicated that education is required for liberation from oppression. These standards of education align with Woodson's thoughts about necessary and adequate education for Black people.

Woodson argued that highly educated Black people were a disservice to the race because they were being educated in ways that created cognitive dissonance in regard to themselves and their racial identities. Woodson's ideas about the identity issue within highly educated Black people mirrored Du Bois' theory of double consciousness. Both Woodson and Du Bois described an identity crisis and internal conflict that Black people must negotiate. Du Bois called the identity conflict double consciousness: a consciousness where one "always views himself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 5). Woodson explains that this "sour" consciousness is a result of an education that instilled Europeanized values while simultaneously devaluing Black culture and achievement. Successful college matriculation did not result in Black acceptance into White professional spaces and fostered Black contempt for their own racial group. African Americans educated in this manner were of no use for the arduous task of racial uplift. In addition, highly educated Blacks were disassociated from the Black masses. Most disastrously, Black people whose thinking had been conditioned as such decried race

consciousness, as they believed it caused racial discrimination and division to persist (Woodson, 1933, p. 6). Woodson described this phenomenon as miseducation.

The education ideologies captured in this study contrast with Woodson's critique. Participants' values communicate that they understand how systemic racism impacts the quality of education available to marginalized populations. In addition, they understand how the lack of access to quality education impacts opportunities for upward mobility, social equity, and quality of life outcomes across Black class groups. In the cluster, participants named **"education for upward mobility"** ideas that align with many of the education values Woodson promoted are conceptually organized. The ideas of the cluster also illustrate that participants understand that education is one of many factors that grants entrance to highly coveted professions that pay middle and upper-class salaries. The group also believes that education for upward mobility must prepare people to be activists equipped to dismantle complex social issues. Woodson argued for reform to the dominant education paradigm of his time that would develop Black professionals to fulfill economic and racial uplift aspirations. He encouraged Black professionals to enter professions associated with status for mainstream motivations; however, living as an aristocrat could not be the ultimate goal. Instead, Black professionals should acquire unique skills, no matter the profession, that equipped them to uplift the race: "Negroes should study for the professions for all the sane reasons that members of another race should go into these lines of endeavor and also on account of the particular call to serve the lowly of their race" (Woodson, 1933, p. 173).

Aligning with Woodson's ideology, participants desire an education that increases their capacity to forge their success trajectories beyond the goals of prestige and financial accumulation, which are the myopic apex achievements of majoritarian success ideologies.

Although they want education that will enable them to attain mainstream success, values captured in clusters express that they want to "acquire education to gain knowledge to grow one's business" and "holistic education so that Black students learn about the information needed for true upward mobility with stable class positionality (budget, taxes, credit, Black studies)." In addition, they communicated that they want education that provides highly skilled training and licensure that positions them as specialized consultants and contractors. Atlanta's core Black middle class wants education that fosters positive racial identity formation and economic enfranchisement. Participants of the study contend with the confines and discrimination of mainstream professional spaces and understand the liberation that could be attained from constructing economic security independent of those social phenomena. Like the ideas Woodson expressed in the chapter "Failure to Learn to Make a Living*,"* the study group defines quality education and success as having the skill, expertise, and desire to become business owners. Woodson explained:

> The training they undergo gives the false conception of life when they believe that the business world owes them a position of leadership…The large majority of them want to be sure of receiving a certain amount at the end of the week or month. They do not seem to realize that the great strides in business have been made by paying men according to what they do…They are unwilling to throw aside their coats and collars and do the groundwork of Negro business and thus make opportunities for themselves instead of begging others for a chance. (pp. 46-48)

Participants value education that develops the business administration knowledge necessary to be successful in entrepreneurial undertakings. While access to the leadership positions Woodson discussed is desired, the study group does not view these positions as their upward mobility final

destinations. Ultimately, they desire the knowledge to construct a life where they can have a real choice in how they make a living. More specifically, the choices must include avenues of economic accumulation that were independent of discriminatory practices and mainstream culture.

The conceptual framework, derived from the perspectives and values of the participants, specifies the components of quality education. The participants' tenets of quality education share significant similarities with the "new program" of education Woodson outlined in chapter 14 of *The Mis-education of The Negro (1933,* pp. 144-156). In addition to the education standards explained in the new program, Woodson also contended that a political education and study of Black history and achievements were vital components of Black education. He argued for upwardly mobile Blacks to acquire specialized skills and training that bolstered their competency to serve the most disenfranchised of the race. The conceptual framework created by the participants contains eight critical components of quality education. To aid with illustrating where the participants' notions of quality education align with Woodson's ideology, the list of quality education parameters below details the values expressed in the study's conceptual framework and also cites the specific places in Woodson's *The Mis-education of the Negro (1933)* where the same values were communicated:

1) Be free of systemic barriers that impede the preparation of Black people to be critical voices and influencers in the policy creation process so that a new social imaginary/reality is possible for all (Woodson, 1933, p. 149, 181-189).
2) Prepare Black people to enter the most competitive professional spaces for financial accumulation and to have the intellectual and moral fiber to meet the specialized

business, economic, legal, and health needs of the Black population (Woodson, 1933, pp. 149-150,173-180).

3) Especially target Black youth and those most disenfranchised of the race to disrupt historically rooted inequities in future generations (Woodson, 1933, pp. 158-159, 135-138).
4) Result in the creation of definitions of success that challenge hegemonic success ideologies (Woodson, 1933, pp. 48, 84, 172).
5) Be provided by people who know and value Black culture and communities instead of mostly White or whitewashed educators who communicate Europeanized cultural values and biases (Woodson, 1933, pp.145, 160-162).
6) Include accurate accounts of history that include Black narratives, achievements, and cultural knowledge to nurture positive racial identity formation and critical sociopolitical thinkers who are motivated to continue to dismantle inequity (Woodson, 1933, pp.151-154); it should especially weaken the school to prison pipeline.
7) Expose Black students to other cultures and world-views so that they have accurate accounts of history that do not diminish the contributions of any race (Woodson, 1933, pp. 154-156) and do not place limits on Black cultural and achievement ideologies.
8) Include informal funds of knowledge that are passed down from generation to generation for wealth and legacy building (Woodson, 1933, pp. 190-197).

The study group and Woodson believe that education of this quality will result in Black people with an education that enables them to become critical thinkers with agency and positive racial/cultural identities. People educated in this manner refuse entry into any “back door” and do not accept positions of inferiority. An accurate historical education also prevents Black people

from internalizing negative stereotypes formulated about them from outside the "veil" (Du Bois, 1903). An education of this caliber results in a single, positive, and enabled consciousness of self to develop. It prevents the development of a conflict-ridden double-consciousness that results in highly educated Blacks being useless to the cause of racial uplift. To the study group, this is what it means to be an educated Black person—or in the words of Woodson, "an educated Negro."

Limitations

There were two primary limitations of this study that are important to discuss. The study is a location-based study. Recruitment initially only targeted participants located in Atlanta proper and was later expanded to include metro-Atlanta residents. This resulted in a smaller number of Black metro-Atlanta residents. The smaller portion of metro-Atlanta participants could mean that the findings are less representative of core Black middle-class people outside of the city's limits. The second significant limitation of the study is that income data and interview narratives rely on truthful reporting/detailing from the participants. Although interview data were triangulated with concept map findings and interview questions were derived from the values indicated by the entire participant group, participants' interview narratives are ultimately their own. The narrative data added important context to the conceptual framework created during the concept-mapping portion of this study, so questions were asked in a variety of ways to increase internal validity. In addition, member checking was also utilized. Income was a significant factor in determining eligibility. Because salary/income information is highly personal, and at times sensitive, no further verification beyond participant reporting was used to verify this information.

Two additional limitations to note are the concept-mapping sample size and the social distancing restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Concept mapping is a data collection and analysis tool that can accommodate large sample sizes to statistically identify similarities in

group thinking and values. In the interest of data manageability and the time constraints of a dissertation study, the study sample size was appropriate for accurate concept mapping, but small in comparison to the sample sizes this methodology could accommodate. A future research opportunity is to recruit a larger sample to increase the findings' external validity. Concept-mapping results in an expansive amount of data. Five diverse participants were purposefully selected for interviews to add important sociocultural context to concept map findings. It would be an exciting sociological inquiry to capture the narratives of all participants of the study. Increasing the number of interviews to supplement the concept map data may be a worthwhile research design for future studies that utilize these data methods.

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated that social distancing be practiced heavily during the timeframe of data collection. All interviews were conducted using a virtual video-conferencing platform. No face-to-face interviews were conducted, which might have negatively impacted the possibility of more organic rapport building that could have resulted in richer qualitative interviews. While all participants committed fully to the interviews, there were times when other responsibilities taking place in the home of the participants also required their attention while interviewing. Although distractions appeared minor, there is no way to know the impact these occurrences might have had on the data collection process.

Policy Recommendations

One of the primary motivations for this inquiry was to glean information from an understudied and seemingly privileged group of the American population to provide more textured accounts of the reality of achievement and upward mobility to arm education and social justice policymakers with the information to produce better-aligned reform efforts. The Black middle class is an ideal population for this inquiry because of the duality of their class and race

positionalities. Education has historically been the main vehicle for upward mobility within the Black population because of the dearth of generational wealth (Claytor, 2019; Lacy, 2007; Pattillo, 2007). The lack of generational wealth underscores the need to examine the validity of merit-based claims of achievement. Black middle-class people's achievement possibilities, and their subsequent economic stability, are more contingent upon systemic barriers and societal economic fluctuations than their White counterparts who, on average, are supported by more generational wealth (Claytor, 2019). For example, past research (Thomas, 2015; Zambrana & MacDonald, 2009) indicates that systemic racism:

- Limits Black access to higher education
- Influences residential segregation and school district lines
- Impacts educational policies that allocate financial resources for K-12 education institutions
- Impacts educational standards of schools that ultimately limit educational preparedness
- Fosters the social perceptions and stereotypes that teachers believe and act upon when teaching Black students

Research that examines historically stigmatized populations who also have assumed privilege has the potential to provide unparalleled insights for policymakers who aim to challenge and correct social inequality.

The findings of this study possess that promise. Although some of the most salient recommendations based on findings from Chapter Four will be detailed, this discussion will only exhaust some of the possible recommendations that can be gleaned from this inquiry. The list will also continue to grow as future analysis of the data beyond the scope of this inquiry is completed. The policy recommendations below highlight the most pressing education and social

equity values expressed in the conceptual framework. The policy recommendations are also directly informed by the eight parameters for quality education detailed earlier in this discussion.

School Funding—Education policy must be aggressively attentive to their school funding practices. One of the most pressing equity concerns regarding education was the need for sustained access to quality education for students. Atlanta Public Schools (APS) are particularly positioned to be involved in neoliberal/gentrification agendas that siphon resources from the schools and students who are arguably the most underserved. During the 2017-2018 school year, The National Education Association reported that 45.1% of the education funding in Georgia was sourced by local taxes (The Center Square, 2019). Education policymakers in Atlanta must aggressively work to protect schools' financial resources from tax allocation districts (TADs) agendas that utilize school tax allocations for non-educational commercial investments, such as the 1999 Atlantic Station project or the 2005 Atlanta Beltline project. While TADs possess the potential to increase property taxes over time, Atlanta schools must carefully examine the shortcomings of this model for increasing education revenue (Robinson & Simonton, 2019). In addition to examining the TAD model, Georgia must also reconsider the percentage of education funding that is derived from local taxes. Although the state's budget has a surplus of $5 billion, the state still remains to be one of the six states that do not provide schools with additional funds based on the number of low-income families. While the state does provide equalization grants to supplement education funds in districts with low wealth, the state has consistently reduced those funds over the years (Owens, 2019; Pierce, 2020). Although the APS *Budget Primer* for fiscal year 2021 outlines a detailed budget plan, complete with parameters for managing current TAD agreements and state funding sources with high accountability, the current practices of relying heavily on local taxes and state allocations threaten access to quality education.

Teacher Preparedness/Diversity—From the participants' perspective, quality education is predicated on the presence of educators who value and understand Black funds of knowledge. Participants believe that culturally misaligned instructors limit K-12 educational achievement. Limited achievement contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline and thwarts college access. The current teacher shortage, comprised of vacancies and unqualified teachers (Edsall, 2022), makes it unrealistic to ask schools to refuse the support of programs such as Teach For America (TFA), which have become embedded into the structure of K-12 education. However, districts must be willing to negotiate new parameters for the teaching contracts facilitated through this program. The final regulations of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) charge low-performing schools to create improvement plans that "review resource inequities related to ineffective, out-of-field, or inexperienced teachers" (Department of Education, 2016). A responsible and accountable reaction to this charge is for schools to reexamine how they engage with Teach For America.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the social and economic factors that strained the nation's dwindling teacher population (Carver-Thomas, 2022). These constraints make the need for programs such as TFA more pronounced. However, school districts have a responsibility to their student populations and communities to work intimately with TFA to minimize the potential negative impacts of a teacher supply that is unprepared for the specialized needs of marginalized and under-resourced student groups. Schools must begin to demand that they be heavily involved in developing the diversity and cultural competency curricula that prep TFA teachers. TFA teachers should be mandated to engage in ongoing cultural literacy programs that are co-created with community stakeholders, parents, and community leaders to lessen the occurrence of deficit-led teaching. School districts should be provided the resources by TFA to facilitate these trainings locally with community leaders and experts most knowledgeable about

the communities in which TFA members are placed. Lastly, research indicates that the two-year teaching contract of TFA destabilizes more than stabilizes under-resourced populations such as those serviced by Atlanta Public Schools (Nohria, 2022). For school districts such as APS, the teaching contracts should be negotiated to last longer to minimize the negative impact on students.

Curriculum—The education of Black students must accomplish two important goals: 1) it must provide academic preparation/skills and 2) it must prepare students to traverse their socio-political reality. One-size-fits-all curricula such as Common Core fail to address the hidden curriculums and the unique needs of marginalized student groups. Hidden curriculums often silently impose behavioral expectations that are informed by mainstream cultural norms. Compounding the issue of hidden curriculums are the educational needs of students who will need much more than merit to realize upward mobility goals. The most effective solution to this issue is for education policy to empower districts to either organically design curricula or supplement curricula to develop student populations to meet their education needs.

Teachers must also be protected from the contentious political issues that result in them having to navigate their own personal beliefs and the general public's beliefs in their classrooms (Edsall, 2022). For Black student populations, it would allow teachers to include education about Black historical achievements and Black contributions to the U.S. and world without harassment, literature bans, and angry parents. The goal of curricula must be to instill knowledge of a student's social condition, hope, and equip students to dismantle inequities that threaten their quality of life. In Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998), he explains that instead of being a transfer of knowledge, education should empower students to affirm: “I like to be human because in my unfinishedness I know that I am conditioned. Yet consciousness of such

conditioning, I know that I can go beyond it, which is the essential difference between conditioned and determined existence" (p. 54).

Policy & Accountability—Black anti-discrimination and diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts must move beyond performative guidelines. Racial reform policies must accept the reality of racial dynamics and the permanence of its presence in the nation's social, political, legal, and economic systems. When acts of racial discrimination against Blacks are carried out in education and socio-political arenas, it is imperative that there is swift condemnation and repercussions. Failure to do so sends the message that it is acceptable to continually deny Black students and citizens fair and equitable treatment. In addition, swift accountability discourages others from committing similar transgressions. Anti-discrimination reforms for Black people must specifically outline the consequences for failing to adhere to government regulations, such as equitable funding for schools or discriminatory practices in professional spaces. It is no longer acceptable for it to take years or decades for actions to be taken or to attempt to assuage the social equity demands with racial/holiday symbols such as making Juneteenth a national holiday. Derrick Bell, a civil rights lawyer and one of the most preeminent critical race scholars, discussed racial symbols in *Faces At The Bottom Of The Well*:

> Religious symbols, freedom symbols, legal symbols, and now holiday symbols. They are all but worthless at the bank, but sometimes [B]ack folks don't try to cash them there. Know what I mean?"… "I don't want my symbols on the shelf. I want them in action, embarrassing [W]hite folks and mobilizing [B]lack folks to take themselves seriously. (Bell, 1992, pp. 30-35)

Instead of symbolic actions, education and social reform efforts must 1) include those most impacted by inequity in the policy creation process, 2) provide explicit timeframes for the

implementation of policies that aim to correct discriminatory practices, and 3) explicitly detail consequences and the timelines that punitive measures will be taken. Moving policy beyond "feel-good" mandates to actions that Black populations desire to see moves the United States closer to the unrealized promise of equality for all that Black Americans grapple to realize daily.

Education reform that seeks to unearth structural inequity must answer to a reform charge that is much more revolutionary than the current approach. Teacher accountability requirements must be examined to determine if their presence is exacerbating or alleviating current education issues. In addition, teacher wages must respond appropriately to the decline of education graduates. Education policymakers must consider that higher wages being associated with high-skill jobs drive people with high skills to those jobs. If highly skilled people are needed in the field of education, the salaries must mimic other high-skill jobs (Edsall, 2022). Policymakers must also examine the impact of censoring teacher curricula to respond to public political tensions. The current education reform model disproportionately depends on a student's social origins to determine their life opportunities. Although Black middle-class people start from an arguably more privileged social origin than their poor or working-class counterparts, research demonstrates that their experiences with systemic racism negatively impact the promises of merit-based mobility. Radical education reform must be willing to answer a different call:

> This is a task far more ambitious than has ever been attempted by any society; not just offer, in a passive way, equal access to educational resources, but to provide an educational environment that will free a child’s potentialities for learning from the inequalities imposed upon him by the accident of birth into one or another home or social environment. (Lewis, 2011, p. 193)

If education reform is approached from this perspective, solutions possess the potential to ensure that the promises of education equality are realized.

Upward mobility in America is a function of equality more so than merit; upward mobility opportunities are accessible insofar as people have equitable access to resources and opportunities. Social inequality is systemically embedded; therefore, it requires systemic approaches to dismantle. Discriminatory acts against Black people are protected mainly because the consequences in society are relatively low, thus supporting majoritarian marginalization of Black people throughout all class levels. Black experiences with upward mobility illustrate that performative policies only scratch the surface of solutions and thwart the possibility of true merit-based achievement. Despite being prepared to take advantage of opportunity, pervasive discrimination that is allowed to exist without consequence results in limited privilege in populations who are seemingly taking advantage of the promise of merit, such as the Black middle class. In populations who are less privileged, the consequences of symbolic social reform stifles opportunity all together. Acquiring knowledge directly from those impacted by inequity arms policymakers with the information to move toward critically informed action that has the potential to make a difference.

Implications & Suggestions for Future Research

The conceptual framework and findings of this study have several implications. Many conclusions of the analysis require further research to better inform education and social reform efforts that aim to decrease societal inequity. The first implication is that current education reform efforts are failing to address the most pressing concerns for Black populations. The current funding, teacher preparedness, and curriculum practices fail populations that are high as well as low in educational achievement. Sustained access to quality education, as defined by the

participant group, requires financial resources, empowered teachers, and classrooms free of political agendas. There must also be significant focus on recruiting and retaining teachers with passion, cultural competency, and skill for under-resourced student populations (Edsall, 2022). Adequate financial resources relieve school districts of the need to rely on problematic partnerships such as Teach For America. In addition to adequate funding, schools that serve large portions of Black students must purposefully design curricula that adequately educate. The critical components of quality education captured in this study demand that students are prepared to enter into the most competitive careers. Although this charge is one to be expected more of a college education, a student's K-12 education is the pathway into the colleges and majors that would result in this preparation. Participants believe that a Black cultural/historical education is also required to be considered adequately educated.

Future research specific to Black education values should investigate how current education policies/curricula, especially those that serve Black populations, align or diverge from the eight critical components of quality education outlined in this study. This research charge is nuanced, as K-12 education contains a variety of contexts within which education is delivered. Despite the breadth of this research potential, it is critical that we investigate the state of education using standards derived by populations who have been historically excluded from quality access. There is also a significant opportunity to use the research methods of this study to glean insights from youth regarding what they think, how they think, and what they value concerning education and education equity. Engaging youth in concept mapping and utilizing the findings for teacher professional development and curriculum reform possess promise for bolstering education outcomes, improving teacher cultural competency, and neutralizing the power dynamics that can pose as barriers to education reform efforts. Another point of inquiry is

to consider if the components of quality education shift for different class groups of Black people (i.e., poor, working, lower-middle, upper, or elite). Lastly, future research must endeavor to identify the key objectives of the cultural/historical curriculum that the study group believes should be included in a quality education framework.

The second implication is that merit-based upward mobility is problematic for core Black middle-class people. Various factors impact how they can experience upward mobility. There is a general understanding that most upwardly mobile Black people will have to exercise more effort—jump through more hoops—to access professional opportunities. In addition, they also have to be able to effectively "play the game" (exercise cultural reflexivity) to maintain their professional privileges/opportunities without sacrificing cultural/racial identities. Future research must specifically explore the narratives of Atlanta's Black professionals to attempt to capture the cultural and professional toolkits they employ. Identifying this toolkit could prove to be an invaluable resource for equipping upwardly mobile Blacks to "play the game" and possibly decrease the amount of "racial battle fatigue" experienced. It would also be illuminating for Black middle-class research that focuses on the Atlanta experience to examine and capture counterstories of discrimination in professional arenas. All study participants agree that opportunity is pervasive in Atlanta; however, they also allude to experiencing unique circumstances in their upwardly mobile experiences. The Black Mecca histories must include these stories too. Lastly, more transplants are present in the study's participant pool compared to Atlanta natives. Future research would be wise to compare and contrast the upward mobility narratives between these two groups. While there are sure to be similarities, different insights about the nature of opportunity for Black people in Atlanta will be revealed from a study with this focus.

The third implication is that although Atlanta's core Black middle class is uncompromising in their racial identities, cultural nationalism, and responsibility to the Black race, there was some data collected that suggests that there may be aspects of core Black middle-class culture that separate them from working or lower-class Black people. Future research should investigate the class culture of working and lower classes of Black people in Atlanta to document these important cultures and identify places where the cultures either overlap or diverge. This research could aid significantly in helping to build community across class lines. It could also aid with providing a more nuanced understanding of Black life in the Black Mecca. The current image of Atlanta is that it is an oasis for Black achievement and culture; however, historical and economic research illuminates that there are fallacies in this narrative. Research must capture the reality of life for all Black populations that make up Atlanta. To capture the full Black Atlanta experience, future studies must also intentionally recruit a sample that equally includes Black people from metro Atlanta and Atlanta proper, as this study mostly included Atlanta proper residents. When most conceptualize Atlanta they instinctively include metro Atlanta as it has become understood that those geographic areas make up the culture and imagery of the city. Intentionally investigating all of metro Atlanta is important sociological work because people's experiences undergird policy initiatives. In addition, the city is a prime location for development and gentrification. Therefore, it is important that researchers capture the cultures that are oftentimes pushed to the margins. If Atlanta is a "Black" city, researchers must do the work to capture the history and cultures of the Black people who create, inhabit, and engage with culture in the city.

A final implication of this research is the compelling findings derived from the sample of this study. In order for data to be manageable within the timeframe of this study, recruitment

numbers were modest in relation to what is possible for a concept mapping methodological design. While the appropriate number of participants was recruited to produce accurate results when utilizing the concept mapping methodology, it is usually helpful when group characteristics are studied from larger sample sizes. Future inquiries should aim to maximize recruiting of people who fit this study's description of the core middle class. Comparing the conceptual framework of this study to a larger sample of the core-middle would aid in increasing the study's external validity. Stronger external validity could position these findings to be more likely to influence policy decisions regarding education and social equity reform.

Conclusion: Black, Educated, & Bougie

To conclude this study, it is necessary and appropriate to reflect on where the journey began—2004 at Mahogany Books and Gift Store located in Macon, GA. My eldest sister purchased a copy of *The Mis-education of the Negro* to quell my excited curiosity about the title and what its contents must entail. I was a sophomore in college. Fourteen years later, upon the completion of this study, I now more fully understand that Carter G. Woodson, an intellectual ancestor so-to-speak, was calling me to take action. Throughout the different eras of my personal and intellectual development and achievement, I have continued to sit with, critically analyze, and take actions guided by the information written in his study of education. My hope for my education is twofold. First, I personally endeavor to obtain the kind of education that would develop me as an empowered agent of my liberation. Second, I aim to contribute to the intellectual and physical labor necessary to improve the possibility that Black people can access a life right: education. However, I intend to create the conditions for Black people to have more than just "an education:"

> It may be of no importance to the race to be able to boast today of many times as many 'educated' members as it had in 1865. If they are of the wrong kind, the increase in numbers will be a disadvantage rather than an advantage. The only questions which concerns us here is whether these 'educated' persons are actually equipped to face the ordeal before them or unconsciously contribute to their own undoing by perpetuating the regime of the oppressor…The element of race does not enter here. It is merely a matter of exercising common sense in approaching people through their environment in order to deal with conditions as they are rather than as you would like to see them or imagine that they are. There may be differences in method of attack, but the principle remains the same. (Woodson, 1933, p. xi)

As I conclude this study and begin a new phase of my commitment to education equity that engenders liberated lives, I respectfully like to believe that this work is the kind of intellectual inquiry Woodson and Frazier would have hoped to see in scholarship. Throughout the study, the participants enumerated the ways that their achievements are not only for individual gains but also to honor the struggle and contributions of their ancestors. Participants and I aim to do all within our beings to embody our ancestor's wildest dreams. I hope this dissertation is just that.

The findings of this study contain celebratory revelations and uncomfortable truths. While upward mobility is a familiar experience to those in this study, and many in the Black middle class, it is a taxing experience. Participants know this as "racial battle fatigue." This phenomenon also resonates with my personal experiences as a doctoral student and an ambitious professional. Black middle-class people traverse the troubled waters of their dual class/race realities and must contend with exercising cultural reflexivity appropriately or the consequences for failing to do so. The champions and allies of racial equity—no matter race—also traverse

exceptionally complicated realities and harsh truths. One of those hard truths is that education and social equity policymakers are missing the mark. While the remedies to fixing their "aim" are vast, one straightforward solution is to consult/center the experiences, values, and needs of those whose quality of life opportunities they intend to improve. This study is one of many that provide critical insights. Critically informed insights are available, and more nuanced understandings are constantly produced. Policymakers must now be confronted with direct questions to better understand the hindrances to critical changes in the policymaking process. One of the most pressing questions being: Whose interests and priorities are policymakers protecting? Is it the needs and interests of individuals or neoliberal and industrial complex agendas?

There are dire quality-of-life implications in the answers to these questions. This is especially true for those who must re-center themselves daily as they are intentionally pushed to the margins. Paulo Freire explains in *Pedagogy of Freedom* that there is a loss of humanity when one elects to be a passive participant in the creation of their reality and that humanity exists in knowing that oppressive systems are not eternal. He writes:

> In other words, my presence in the world is not so much of someone who is inserted as if belonging essentially to it. It's the position of one who struggles to become the subject and maker of history and not simply a passive, disconnected object. I like being a human person because even though I know that the material, social, political, cultural, and ideological conditions in which we find ourselves generate divisions and transformation, I know also that the obstacles are not eternal. (Freire, 1998, p. 55)

Upward mobility and educational achievement are more than an exercise of status attainment. It is an exercise of humanity and a function of social equity. To deny it is an injustice.

Despite the unrealized promise of merit-based achievement, this study provides hope. It is a testament to the resilience that is beautifully and problematically synonymous with the Black experience. Most inspiringly, this study's social equity and education values loudly communicate that Black people do not accept performative equity reforms. In addition, some Black Americans do not intend to hope for systems to change. Instead, they aim to secure access to spaces where they can do it themselves. The progress of ancestors and allies has created conditions where sociopolitical conditions are appropriately primed for marginalized populations to hold education and government systems accountable.

The education values and framework presented in this study are a continuance of important work in this area. Even the values communicated here are just the surface of all there is to capture and understand about the core Black middle-class experience in Atlanta. The achievement narratives beget more questions about their accomplishments and the breadth of achievement that exists within this population. In addition, there are many opportunities to document and understand this group's commitment to racial uplift and places where divisive beliefs and practices can be better understood and possibly deconstructed. What is accomplished is demonstrating the value of selecting appropriate research methods, designing methodologically sound studies, and utilizing critical theory to reveal data that would otherwise remain hidden. My analysis of data reveals the usefulness of following advice from contemporary studies and literature gaps to disrupt the tendency of imposing antiquated understandings on the Black middle class. The data findings indicate that the Black middle class values financial security, their blackness, racial improvement/equity, and maintaining their class culture/status. In addition, each area of their conceptual framing of success, education, class identity, and social equity are connected by the common phenomena of decreasing the burden of

persistent racialization and inhabiting their Black identities without compromise. The participants' perspectives explain what it means to be bougie yet connected to the Black experience. The research design and analytical approach I selected demonstrate what information can be revealed when you center the voices that matter in the understandings of their cultures. As the Black middle class continues to evolve and expand, new studies must shift their methodologies, theories, and research questions to counter systemic inequity because it will continue to evolve and manifest in ways foreign to research tools that fail to evolve as well.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A- Recruitment Flyer

Are You Black, Educated, & Bougie?

Research Participants Needed

Purpose of Study

To explore how the education and social justice values of core middle class Black people living in Atlanta, Georgia influences social mobility goals and behaviors and to record the definition(s) of success that exist within this group.

Who Is Eligible

Persons who:

1) Self-identify as Black or African American

2) Have lived in Atlanta, Georgia for a minimum of 5 consecutive years

3) Have a minimum of a Bachelor's degree

4) Earn between $50,000 - $100,000/ year

5) Are between the ages of 25 - 55

Study Description

- Participants will complete 3-4 research activities over the course of 5-6 weeks. Each activity will take 1-2 hours of time.
- All research activities can be completed remotely and at times convenient for you within the specified time frames.

To Participate:

Click HERE

Or scan QR code with your phone's camera

Compensation:

Earn up to $80 for participating in study

($20 per activity)

About The Researcher

This research is being conducted by Kinyatta Trice, Doctoral student in the Educational Policy Studies Department of Georgia State University.

If you have questions about this research, contact Kinyatta Trice at ktrice2@student.gsu.edu

This study has been approved by the Georgia State University Institutional Review Board
IRB Number: H22377
IRB Approval Date: 3/08/2022

Appendix B - Recruitment Web Form

Question	Choices
First Name	
Last Name	
Email Address	
Phone Number	
What is your current level of education?	Less than high school; high school degree or equivalent (e.g. GED); some college but no degree; associate degree; bachelor degree; master degree; doctorate
What is your current annual income?	Less than $20,000; $20,000- $34,000; $35,000 - $49,000; $50,000 - $74,000; $75,000 - $100,000; More than $100,000
What is your zip code	[All Atlanta proper zip codes prefilled]; other (type in option)
What is your zip code neighborhood?	
How many years have you lived in Atlanta, Georgia?	Born & raised; 1-11 months; 1-4 years; 5-7 years; 8-10 years; 11-13 years; 14 years or more
What is your age?	24 years or younger; 25-34; 35-44; 45-55; 56 or older
Gender	Woman; man; non-binary; prefer not to say
I understand that this study will include 3 separate research activities that will each take 1-2 hours over a period of 5 weeks. Research activities can be completed remotely and at my leisure within the specified time frames for each activity.	Yes; No
I am interested in being contacted to participate in a 90-minute interview about this topic in the future.	Yes; No

Appendix C - Official Letter Invite To Participate In Study

Dear ,

I am excited that you have expressed interest in my study. Thank you! The study is titled *Black, Educated, and Bougie: Analyzing Success Narratives, Cultural Trends, and Social Justice Values of Atlanta's Core Black Middle Class.* Completing this study is the final step in completing my doctorate degree. I am extremely grateful that you are interested in supporting me in this goal.

I had an exciting number of people who expressed interest in the study. You are being contacted because you match the demographic needed for this study.

If you are still interested, please email me back to confirm. Once I get your confirmation I will schedule a call with you to discuss any questions you may have and then share the next steps for participation so that we can get started.

Research Activities—You will have 2 weeks to complete each activity. Each activity will begin one week after the last activity concludes. All activities will be completed remotely, using software you can access via a web browser.

Name	**Pay** *Delivered by Amazon gift card via email at the completion of the activity.	**Who Participates**
Activity I: Brainstorming (Estimated time: 45 minutes) You will be asked to come up with short phrases in response to a topic prompt about the research topic. *Example Prompt: Black people are successful because-* .	**$20**	16 People *I need everyone who agrees to participates to complete this activity
Activity II: Sorting & Ranking (Estimated Time: 60-90 minutes) You will be provided a list of all statements generated from in Activity I, and will be asked to sort them into "piles" that are meaningful to you. The list of statements will be no longer than 100 statements. After sorting, you will rank each statement based on criteria provided from the researcher. *Example Criteria: On a scale of 1-5—with 5 being the greatest, how important is this to Black upward mobility?*	**$20**	16 People *I need everyone who agrees to participates to complete this activity
Activity III: Interpretation of Data Maps (Virtual Focus Group) (Estimated Time: 60 minutes) You will be asked to review the visual representation of the data results from activity II, to aid the researcher with making sure it accurately reflects the thoughts/values of the group.	**$20**	8 People *Only 8 people from the initial group will complete this activity
Activity IV: Semi-Structured Interview	**$20**	4 People

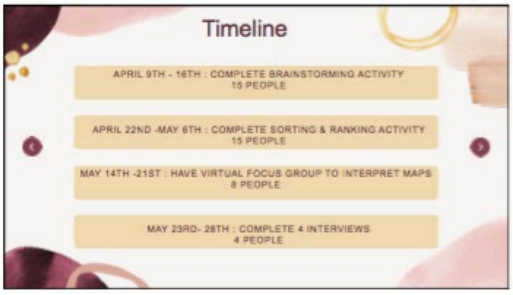
You will provide an interview, guided by open-ended questions from the researcher, about your education, upward mobility, and values regarding equity and social justice.		*Only 4 people from the initial group will provide an interview.

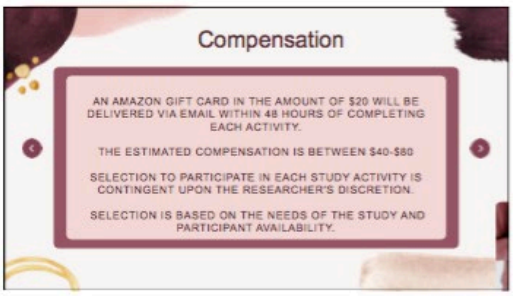
Topic: Black, Ed, & Bougie Study Info & Next Steps
Time: Mar 30, 2022 12:00 PM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

Join Zoom Meeting

https://us06web.zoom.us/j/6105598878?pwd=aGd2cndQRSs1eGRnb1dVQ01wUDhyUT09
Meeting ID: 610 559 8878
Passcode: Trice

Appendix D - Onboarding/Participant Onboarding Slide Deck






Software
All data will be collected using a web-based software, CONCEPT SYSTEMS. Web-links will be sent via email that will provide access to each activity. By clicking on the activity names below, you can view videos to get a better understanding of what you will be doing.
I WILL SEND THIS TO YOU VIA EMAIL FOR REFERENCE
BRAINSTORMING
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS
SORTING
Ranking
Click a title to see a video tutorial

Appendix E - Concept Map Consent

Georgia State University
Informed Consent

Title: Black, Educated, and Bougie: Analyzing Success Narratives, Cultural Trends, and Social Justice Values of Atlanta's Core Black Middle Class
Principal Investigator: Dr. Joyce King
Student Principal Investigator: Kinyatta Trice

Introduction and Key Information
You are invited to take part in a research study. It is up to you to decide if you would like to take part in the study.

The purpose of this study is to explore how the education and social justice values of core middle class Black people in Atlanta, Georgia influences their social mobility goals and behaviors and to record the definition(s) of success that exist within this group.

Your role in the study will last up to 5 hours over five weeks.

You will be asked to do the following: participate in a process called concept mapping. This involves coming up with ideas in response to a statement, organizing those ideas into categories, ranking the importance of the ideas, and helping to understand the findings from this process. Participating in this study will not expose you to any more risks than you would experience in a typical day.

This study is not designed to benefit you individually. Overall, we hope to gain information about how Black core middle class social mobility is impacted by the group's education and social justice values with the hope of improving education and social reform targeting Black populations.

Purpose
The purpose of the study is to explore how the education and social justice values of middle class Black people in Atlanta, Georgia influence their social mobility goals and behaviors and to record the definition(s) of success that exist within this group. You are invited to take part in this research study because you 1) identify as Black/African American, 2) earn between $50,000 and $100,000 annually, 3) have earned a college degree, 4) have lived in Atlanta, Georgia for at least five years, and 5) are between the ages of 25 – 55 years old. A total of 15 people will be invited to take part in this study.

Procedures
If you decide to take part, you will participate in three separate research activities during a process called concept mapping. The three activities you will participate in are: 1) brainstorming, 2) sorting and ranking, 3) interpretation of maps.
Before your involvement, the researcher will develop a topic that will be specific to the research focus of the study and broad enough to elicit a myriad of responses. The researcher will also create ranking criteria that will be used to provide the ratings that will guide you in the sorting

and ranking step.

Brainstorming: You will be given the topic prompt and instructions to generate short sentences or statements in response to the prompt. To ease the burden of participation, you will have the option to submit statements using a web form or a manual brainstorming form. You will be given two weeks to submit statements or mail them in. It is anticipated that it will take you 1 hour to complete this step.

Sorting and Ranking: This step will begin one week after the end of the brainstorming step. The student researcher will take the statements from all participants and reduce the list to no more than 100 statements. You will be given the list of statements to sort and rank. You will be contacted via telephone and/or Zoom meeting by the student researcher to provide instructions for sorting and ranking. You will be instructed to organize/sort the statements in a way that is meaningful to you. You will have the choice to sort and rank using a web form or a manual sorting and ranking packet. You will be given two weeks to complete this step. It is anticipated that this step will take 1 to 2 hours.

Interpretation of Maps: This session will take place virtually and will occur one week after the sorting and ranking step. Once the researcher has analyzed the data and created the concept map pictures, a smaller group of participants will be asked to assist with interpreting the maps by helping to describe the maps that are created. If invited to be a part of this group, you will participate in a Zoom call to discuss the concept map pictures. This session will not be recorded. It is anticipated that this step will take 1-2 hours.

Future Research

Researchers will remove information that may identify you and may use your data for future research. If we do this, we will not ask for any additional consent from you.

Risks

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life. No injury is expected from this study, but if you believe you have been harmed, contact the research team as soon as possible. Georgia State University and the research team have not set aside funds to compensate for any injury.

Benefits

This study is not designed to benefit you personally. Overall, we hope to gain information about how Black core middle class social mobility is impacted by the group's education and social justice values with the hope of improving education and social reform targeting Black populations.

Alternatives

The alternative to taking part in this study is to not take part in the study.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you

have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. You may refuse to take part in the study or stop at any time. This will not cause you to lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Confidentiality

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. The following people and entities will have access to the information you provide:
Dr. Joyce King and Kinyatta Trice
GSU Institutional Review Board
Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)

We will use a study number rather than your name on study records. The information you provide will be stored on password and firewall protected computers. The participant code sheet will be stored on the same password and firewall protected computer in a separate file with a different password to increase privacy protection. The code sheet will be destroyed one year after data collection is completed.

Participants will have the choice to participate virtually, using a web form, or by mail throughout the study. Websites and virtual platforms that are used for data collection will require passwords and be encrypted to keep data confidential. No IP addresses will be collected. Although these efforts will be taken, there is still risk that data could be compromised when using the Internet.

When we present or publish the results of this study, we will not use your name or other information that may identify you.

Contact Information

Contact Student Principal Investigator Kinyatta Trice at ktrice2@gsu.edu or 678-650-8004 or the Principal Investigator, Dr. Joyce King at jking@gsu.edu
If you have questions about the study or your part in it
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study

The IRB at Georgia State University reviews all research that involves human participants. You can contact the IRB if you would like to speak to someone who is not involved directly with the study. You can contact the IRB for questions, concerns, problems, information, input, or questions about your rights as a research participant. Contact the IRB at 404-413-3500 or irb@gsu.edu.

Consent

We will email you a copy of this consent form to keep. You can also print or save a copy of the form for your records.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please provide verbal consent by stating “I agree to participate in the study.”

Appendix F - Interview Informed Consent

Georgia State University
Informed Consent

Title: Black, Educated, and Bougie: Analyzing Success Narratives, Cultural Trends, and Social Justice Values of Atlanta's Core Black Middle Class
Principal Investigator: Dr. Joyce King
Student Principal Investigator: Kinyatta Trice

Introduction and Key Information
You are invited to take part in a research study. It is up to you to decide if you would like to take part in the study.

The purpose of this study is to explore how the education and social justice values of core middle class Black people in Atlanta, Georgia influences their social mobility goals and behaviors and to record the definition(s) of success that exist within this group.

Your role in the study will last 90 minutes. In some instances it may be necessary to schedule a follow up interview that will take no longer than 30 minutes.

You will be asked to do the following: participate in a semi-structured interview.
Participating in this study will not expose you to any more risks than you would experience in a typical day.

This study is not designed to benefit you individually. Overall, we hope to gain information about Black core middle class social mobility is impacted by the group's education and social justice values with the hope of improving education and social reform targeting Black populations.

Purpose
The purpose of the study is to explore how education and social justice values of middle class Black people in Atlanta, Georgia influences their social mobility goals and behaviors and to record the definition(s) of success that exist within this group. You are invited to take part in this research study because you 1) identify as Black/African American, 2) earn between $50,000 and $100,000 annually, 3) have earned a college degree, 4) have lived in Atlanta, Georgia for at least five years, and 5) are between the ages of 25 – 55 years old. A total of 4 people will be invited to participate in this part of the study.

Procedures
If you decide to take part, you will participate in a 90-minute semi-structured interview
You will be engaged in an interview using Zoom video-conferencing software. The interview questions will be guided by the findings from concept mapping part of the study. The interview will gather information about your familial backgrounds, influential mentors, definitions and understandings regarding success, and your values related to education and social justice. In some instances a follow up interview may be scheduled for further discussion of information that was captured in the first interview. Second interviews will be no longer than 30 minutes.

Interviews will be recorded for transcription. The researcher will also make observation notes regarding the setting and body language during the interview.

Future Research
Researchers will remove information that may identify you and may use your data for future research. If

we do this, we will not ask for any additional consent from you.

Risks
In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life. No injury is expected from this study, but if you believe you have been harmed, contact the research team as soon as possible. Georgia State University and the research team have not set aside funds to compensate for any injury.

Benefits
This study is not designed to benefit you personally. Overall, we hope to gain information about how Black core middle class social mobility is impacted by the group's education and social justice values with the hope of improving education and social reform targeting Black populations.

Alternatives
The alternative to taking part in this study is to not take part in the study.

Compensation
You will be paid $20 for providing an interview. You will be emailed an Amazon gift card within 48 hours of completing the interview.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal
You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. You may refuse to take part in the study or stop at any time. This will not cause you to lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Confidentiality
We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. The following people and entities will have access to the information you provide:
Dr. Joyce King and Kinyatta Trice
GSU Institutional Review Board
Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)

We will use a study number rather than your name on study records. The information you provide, audio-recordings, and transcription files will be stored on password and firewall protected computers. The participant code sheet will be stored on the student principal investigator's password and firewall protected computer inside of a password protected file. The code sheet will be destroyed one year after data collection is completed. Audio recordings will also be destroyed one year after data collection is completed.

You will participate using Zoom videoconferencing. Zoom rooms will only be accessible using a password that is specific to you. Zoom software will be encrypted to keep data confidential. No IP addresses will be collected. Although these efforts will be taken, there is still risk that data could be compromised when using the Internet.

When we present or publish the results of this study, we will not use your name or other information that may identify you.

Contact Information
Contact Student Principal Investigator Kinyatta Trice at ktrice2@gsu.edu or 678-650-8004 or the Principal Investigator, Dr. Joyce King at jking@gsu.edu

If you have questions about the study or your part in it
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study

The IRB at Georgia State University reviews all research that involves human participants. You can contact the IRB if you would like to speak to someone who is not involved directly with the study. You can contact the IRB for questions, concerns, problems, information, input, or questions about your rights as a research participant. Contact the IRB at 404-413-3500 or irb@gsu.edu.

Consent
We will email you a copy of this consent form to keep. You can also print or save a copy of the form for your records.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please remain on this call so that we can proceed forward with the interview.

Appendix G – Activity 1 Invite

Appendix G1: Email informing participants that activity 1 was open

Good Evening, «Name»!

Thank you for your patience as I worked to get the project started. We are finally ready to begin the first research activity—BRAINSTORMING. **Please complete this activity by April 16th.**

To Login
Username: «Email»
Password: «Password»

*You may be prompted to change your password upon first login.

Click Here To Begin> PARTICIPANT BRAINSTORMING ACTIVITY

Navigation
There are system tutorials and hints to help you get started. I have also attached the presentation slides that we reviewed when we last spoke. There is a reference slide with video tutorial links if visual learning is a preference. The timeline slide has been adjusted to reflect our new start date and projected start dates for future activities.

If you have any questions, please let me know. ***I am very familiar with the software system. If you need to call to ask a question, please do.***

Kinyatta
[email]
[phone]

Appendix G2:
Email informing participants additional instructions to complete brainstorming activity well

Good Morning !

I wanted to touch base with you all about the brainstorming activity. Many of you have already started, THANK YOU 😊. I contacting you all to make sure that we all have the same understanding about how to complete the first activity.

First Log-In:
When you first log in the software will take you through a quick intro that will give you instructions for navigating the activity. *You can skip this intro and begin the activity, however, the tips may help you navigate with ease and complete the activity correctly.*

To Complete Brainstorming (you will see these reminders when you log in for the first

time)

1. There is a single focus prompt
2. The goal is to respond to this this prompt...fill in the "blank" or "complete the statement" as many ways as you can think of
3. Only enter 1 response at a time
4. When you "add statement" the box will clear so that you can add a new statement/response
5. **Aim to submit 10--20 responses but more are welcomed**
6. **If you have already finished, you can still go back to the activity using your login info to add more statements**

***Please try to come up with as many thoughts as you can about why social equity and education matter to Black achievement/success/upward mobility**

- **education (think culturally relevant, private vs. public, affording higher education, career choices etc., identity shaping, standardized test performance, tracking students, etc.)**
- **think about all the value you find in k-12 and higher education**
- **think about the various ways that social inequity impacts Black lives (police brutality, affordable housing, medical care, financial literacy, environmental factors, food, quality of life, career, income, mental health, childcare, parent care, political power, family planning, marriage, daily stress, etc).**
- **Think about how education and social inequity or equity have impacted your life**

*You will also see the contributions of other participants as you brainstorm your thoughts.

I will reach out to you all via text just to make sure that we all are on the same page as we complete the first activity.

Thank you all so much!

Appendix H - Sorting Activity Email Instructions

Good Afternoon

Thank you for your ideas in the brainstorming activity! We will now begin the second activity. The link to access the next activities: SORTING & RANKING is below. When you start each activity the software will guide you through an intro to explain the activity. I am also including some tips and video resources that you can reference for a refresher about how to complete this activity. ***Please complete this activity by May 7th.***

*You login using the same login from the previous activity. If you need help finding these credentials, please let me know.

To access the Sorting & Ranking Activity:

https://participant.groupwisdom.tech/project/2249/sorting-rating

Video Resources

Click here for >SORTING ACTIVITY

Click here > RATING ACTIVITY

I am excited to see the data outcomes!

Please contact me via text, call, or email if you have questions: 678-650-8004

Appendix I – Focus Group Invites

Appendix I1: Concept Map Focus Group Time Selection Email

Good Afternoon!

I am writing to extend an invite to you to participate in the virtual focus group for my study. ***This focus group will focus on the concept maps that have been created from the data you all have provided. We will do a virtual "walk through" of the data and then "make sense" of the pictures that have been created. We will name "clusters" of statements and make decisions about groups of statements that could be collapsed into larger regions.***

One 60-to-90-minute focus group will be scheduled. Complete the survey question below to select dates and times that would work for you. I will select the time and date that works best for you all.

https://forms.office.com/r/SLriZ42Jnf

Appendix I2: Focus Group Confirmation

Good Afternoon,

Thank you for responding to the availability survey for the focus group. The time selected by everyone is **Sunday, May 22 from 4-5:30**. Please see the zoon link below to join the meeting.

In the focus group we will discuss the findings from data you all have so graciously provided. We will mostly view the visual depictions of the data. Our discussion will strictly focus on the concept maps.

I am looking forward to speaking with you all Sunday and closing out this phase of data collection!

Kinyatta Trice is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

Topic: Black and Bougie Concept Maps Focus Group
Time: May 22, 2022 04:00 PM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

Join Zoom Meeting
https://us06web.zoom.us/j/6105598878?pwd=aGd2cndQRSs1eGRnb1dVQ01wUDhyUT09

Meeting ID: 610 559 8878
Passcode: Trice
One tap mobile
+13017158592,,6105598878#,,,,*826134# US (Washington DC)
+13126266799,,6105598878#,,,,*826134# US (Chicago)

Appendix J - Invite to participate in 1:1 interview

Good Afternoon [Name]!

Thank you for your participation thus far. I am now actively working to collect one on one interviews. I anticipate that the interview will take **45–60-minutes.** The interview will pose 10-12 questions about your ideas about upward mobility, Black culture, education, and social justice. You will also have the opportunity to add any information about these topics that you want to add.

If you are interested in participating in this activity, p**lease email me back to let me know if a time below works for your schedule.**

- **I am open Sunday- June5th (but this is extremely short notice). If it works, I can make myself available for you.**
-

- **Tuesday- June 7th**
  - 11:00 AM – 12:30 PM
  - 3:00 PM – 4:30 PM
- **Saturday—June 11th**
  - 11:00 AM – 12:30 PM
  - 4:00 PM – 5:30 PM
- **Sunday—June 12th**
  - 4:00 PM - 5:30 PM

I look forward to hearing back from you.

Appendix K - Interview Protocol

1. What attracted you to participate in this study?
2. What does it mean to be educated?
    a. What made you feel educated in your life experience?
3. What does it mean to be middle-class?
    a. Why do you believe you are middle class?
    b. What are some key middle-class experiences that are important to you?
        i. Important for your children or younger generations in your family?
4. What does it mean to be successful?
    a. How does this differ from your understanding of society's definition of success?
    b. Tell me about a time in your life you believe you embodied success?
5. What brought you to Atlanta?
    a. What are feelings about the quality of life for Black people in Atlanta?
    b. Family experiences with mobility

6. **How does this statement align to your upward mobility experiences:** "members of the new generation of modern middle class Blacks want to aspire to attain economic prosperity… and also engage in cultural practices that reflect their race. (Claytor—*Black Privilege).*
    a. Tell me about a specific practice you engage in to protect the integrity of your Black identity.
        i. How you spend free time (arts, music, events….
        ii. Businesses you patronize
        iii. Clothes, hair, make-up
        iv. How you spend your money in general

7. What does it mean to honor ancestors in your life?
    a. Why is this important to you?
8. How important is it to lift as you climb?
    a. Tell me about a specific practice you engage in to "lift as you climb in your life.
9. What does social justice for the Black community mean to you?
    a. What does equity for the Black community mean to you?
10. There is prior research (1957) that states that the Black middle class does not care about the problems of the Black masses. How do you feel about this statement?
11. How do you believe colorism or skin color impacts upward mobility opportunity?
12. What is the Black American Dream?
    a. Is there a cultural or behavioral component to class?

Appendix L - Highly Valued Clusters & Statements

Statement Number	Cluster 1-Systemic Accountability In Black Healthcare & Neighborhoods
1	The system (public institutions/government regulations for private businesses) equally granting access to equitable healthcare to live longer lives
12	Decreased redlining in the home ownership process in specific areas
94	A government system of accountability being constructed to ensure that Blacks are able to achieve upward mobility and success
2	The system (public institution/government regulations for private businesses) equally granting access to healthy food
3	The system (public institutions/government regulations for private businesses) equally granting access to healthy natural environments
96	Countering the social norm of Blacks people disproportionately entering the criminal justice system due to racial profiling or receiving unfair sentencing and causing negative impacts to Black families
Statement Number	**Cluster 6: Decreasing Racial Battle Fatigue**
108	Decreasing the disproportionate number of Blacks negatively impacted by environment and access
43	Removing the inequities that require Black people to work harder and go through more "hoops" to be successful
104	Eradicating social injustices because protesting social injustices places unfair burden on the Black experience
Statement Number	**Cluster 7: Access to Privileged Spaces to Decrease Black Oppression**
56	Addressing the social inequities that cause poverty to continue and widen the socioeconomic divide
106	Alleviating persistent poverty that results in higher rates of crime in Black areas, over policing, and police brutality
87	Increased diversity in areas and positions that have influence.
18	Having a seat at the "table" to be able to influence policy, funding, and help direct resources back to Black communities
88	Overcoming systemic boundaries that do not necessarily challenge Caucasian individuals
77	Social equity so that Black people don't always feel the pressure to keep achieving
Statement Number	**Cluster 9: Access to Quality Education**
98	Empowering the most disenfranchised among us through better quality education and decreased social, political, and financial inequity
11	Removing barriers to quality education and higher education that keeps the Black voice silenced in creating policies that call for equality for all individuals
101	Sustained access to quality education along with social equity to upend systemic disadvantages that have plagued Blacks since this country's inception to increase Black upward mobility and success
95	Removing non-culturally responsive and poor quality education that limits upward mobility and keeps the literacy rate low and incarceration of the Black community high
68	Decreasing the cost and increasing the quality of schools (elementary, secondary, post-secondary) to increase the likelihood of upward mobility
27	Getting education to have access to networking opportunities because they play a significant part in business opportunities. Many networking partnerships are forged through people who attend college together
Statement Number	**Cluster 16: Self-reliance Through Community Collaboration**
7	Increased numbers of capable Black community leadership
89	Building our own
17	Developing a community of people working toward a common goal of success

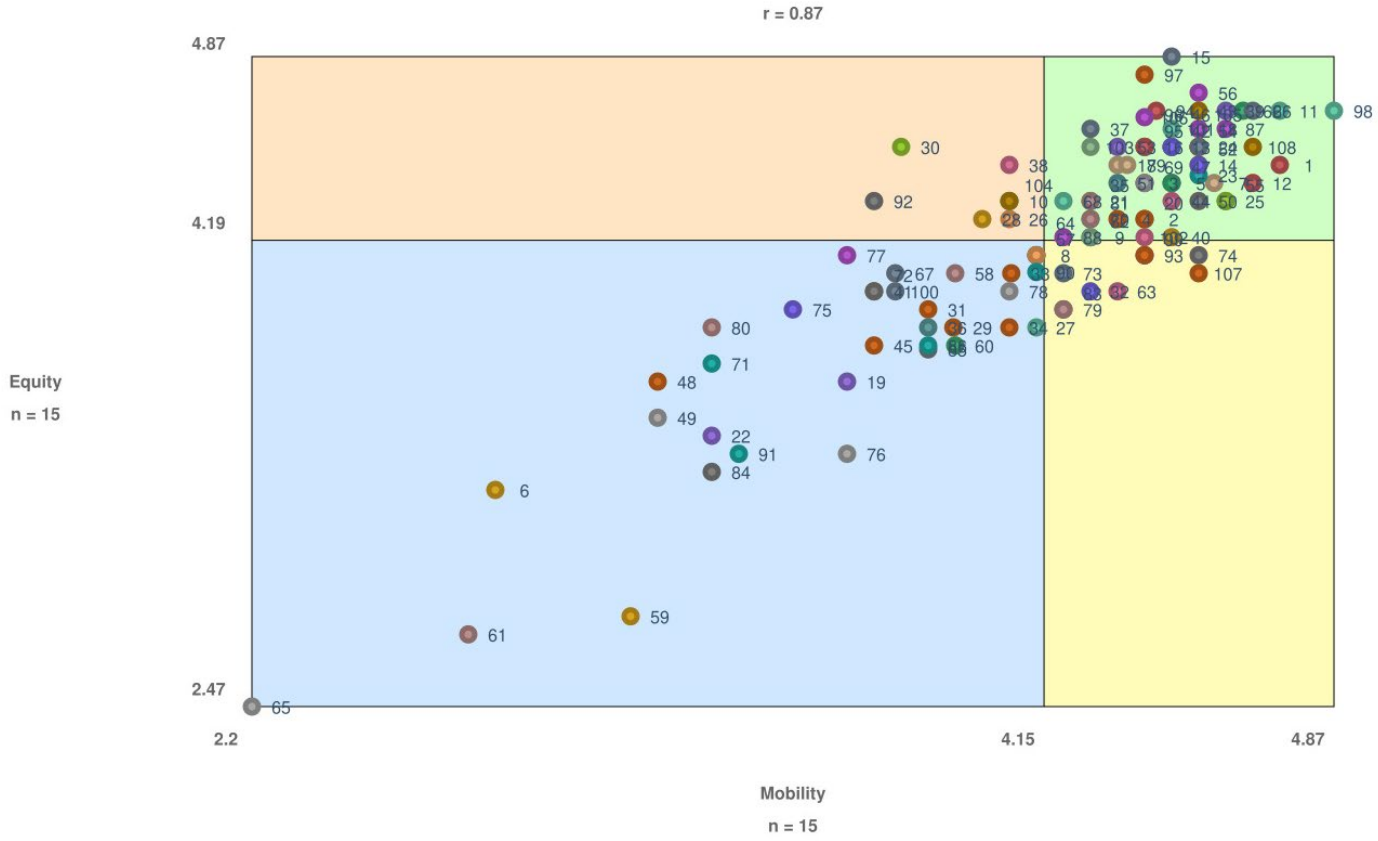
Appendix M – Interview Codes & Themes

Code	Subcodes	Relation To Theoretical Framework	Theme(s)
Black Defined Success	• Your grade is not success • Financial freedom • Taking care of parents • Getting it out the mud • Unrealistic expectations	The definitions of success and success ideologies that exist within the group. Encompasses mainstream understandings/values and Black defined conceptualizations of success	• Uncompromising in Black identity • Generational wealth • Middle-class culture • The Black American Dream • Critical activism
Black American Dream	• Black, But Not Too Black • Mainstream Definitions of Success	Encompasses idiosyncrasies specific to Black achievement values and aspects of mainstream success values; embodying success within a socially equitable society	• Uncompromising in Black identity • Generational wealth • Middle-class culture • The Black American Dream • Critical activism • Critical & liberatory education
Black & Bougie	• Black collective sustainability • Blackity, Black, Black • Buckhead, not Bankhead • E. Franklin Bougie • Generational wealth • Lifting as you climb • Needing to level up	Black middle class definitions, values, behaviors, and lifestyle choices	• Uncompromising in Black identity • Generational wealth • Middle-class culture • The Black American Dream • Critical activism • Critical & liberatory education
Black Defined Equity		Description Black voices defining what it means to have an equitable society	• Black defined success • Systemic accountability and change
To Be Educated	• Holistic education • That made me feel educated	The process of receiving educated that is valued by Black the participants	• Critical & liberatory education • Systemic accountability and change • The Black American Dream

Appendix N - Upward Mobility & Social Equity Value Rankings & Bridge Measures

Upward Mobility & Social Equity/Justice Value Rankings				
Cluster Number	**Cluster Name**	**Upward Mobility Value Rating**	**Social Equity/Justice Value Ratings**	**Bridge and Anchor Measures**
1	Systemic Accountability In Black Healthcare & Neighborhoods	**4.51**	4.46	0.5
2	Leveling Playing Field Via Social & Economic Allies and Reparations	4.32	4.38	0.41
3	Generational Wealth	4.2	4.31	0.44
4	Access To Middle-class Opportunities & Culture	4.31	4.3	0.54
5	Critical Awareness For Activism	4.25	4.4	0.43
6	Decreasing Racial Battle Fatigue	4.42	**4.51**	0.45
7	Access To Privileged Spaces To Decrease Black Oppression	4.32	4.48	0.57
8	Education For Upward Mobility	4.15	4.14	**0.13**
9	Access To Quality Education	4.47	4.44	0.27
10	Cultivating Cultural & Intellectual Capital For Agency	4.28	4.24	0.5
11	Intergenerational Liberatory Knowledge	4.32	4.25	0.64
12	Communal Mental Fortitude	4.27	4.37	0.51
13	Play The "Game" Without Compromising Black Cultural Identity	3.78	3.83	0.9
14	Improving Internal & External Black Pride	4.16	4.16	0.65
15	Honoring Ancestors With Black Defined Success	3.79	3.87	0.77
16	Self-Reliance Through Community Collaboration	4.42	4.44	0.34
17	Building Black Better	4.08	4.17	0.32
18	Fostering Progress By "Betting On Black" & Enoughness	3.89	3.95	0.59
19	Black Lives Matter!	**3.51**	**3.56**	0.7
20	Fostering Progress By Controlling Our Narrative	3.99	3.98	0.44

Appendix O - Go Zone Diagram



Appendix P - Point Map