

Review: Academically Gifted African American Male College Students

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Bonner, F. A., II. (2010). *Academically Gifted African American Male College Students*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

Fred A. Bonner's (2010) *Academically Gifted African American Male College Students* explores the importance of studying giftedness in two institutional types, a historically black college and university (HBCU) and a predominantly white institution (PWI). Divided into eleven chapters, the book presents the challenges facing gifted African American males in higher education and offers alternate ways of addressing these issues. To achieve this purpose, the book offers an account of observations, experiences and narratives of two academically gifted African American undergraduate males. The participants were selected based on recommendations from the Director of the Honors College at the HBCU and from the Director of Multicultural Affairs at the PWI.

Chapter 1 begins with a comprehensive and historical overview of giftedness and features the work of several gifted education theorists including the work of Sir Francis Galton, Alfred Binet, Leta Stetter Hollingsworth, Lev Vygotsky, Howard Gardner, Robert J. Sternberg, Joseph Renzulli, Abraham Tannenbaum, Francoys Gagne, and Martin D. Jenkins. It also showcases some of the early definitions (and their shortcomings) of the concept of giftedness with an example drawing reference even to Socrates. The chapter emphasizes the way in which giftedness was and continues to be highly debated. It highlights the importance of giftedness in various periods and cultures throughout the years, and shows examples of the diverse roles of giftedness in ancient cultures. In the Hellenistic period for example, giftedness in military prowess was valued and in the seventh century A.D. during the Chinese Tang Dynasty much valued giftedness among children was greatly valued. This thorough examination shows that the term 'giftedness' is defined in diverse ways, much due to varying socio-cultural contexts. However, the definition of giftedness has always focused on exceptional ability or extraordinary talent.

Chapter 2 addresses the complexity of giftedness for African American students in P-12 education. Specifically, Bonner addresses topics related to standardized assessments, teacher nomination, learning style preferences, family and peer influences, screening and identification, as well as gifted underachievement. Bonner presents alternate theories for identifying gifted African American students. He also provides a discourse on the relevance of and necessity for multicultural education in teacher preparation, especially for future teacher's who will work with gifted and talented students.

In Chapter 3, Bonner shifts his focus from African American P-12 students to those at the postsecondary level. Although the issues discussed in Chapter 2 (e.g., standardized testing, teacher nominations of gifted African American students, learning style preferences, family and peer influences, screening and identification and gifted underachievement) serve as the foundation for this discussion, other factors were discussed. Based on an empirical research for the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, Bonner found six factors as being most significant in trying to understand the experiences of the gifted African American males at the heart of his study. These factors were relationships with faculty, peer relationships, family influence and support, college selection, self-perception, and institutional environment. The research found that these were the most influential factors that illuminated the experiences of the participants at the postsecondary level.

The next chapter, Chapter 4, provides the background for the research study Bonner conducted for his doctoral dissertation. The study explored the perceptions of two academically gifted African American male undergraduate students, one attending a HBCU and the second attending a predominantly white institution (PWI), also referred to as a traditionally white institution (TWI). In this chapter, Bonner explores how each participant perceived and experienced giftedness within different contexts. It chronicles and expounds on the experiences of each participant within the context of their particular academic institution. Bonner used a biographical questionnaire, engaged in multiple telephone conversations and conducted face to face standardized open interviews with participants and their friends, instructors and campus administrators. The information from the study informs chapters 5 through 8 as they address the overall experiences of the two male African American gifted participants. These experiences run the gamut from social interactions through to academic experiences.

In Chapter 5, Bonner introduces Trey Williams, one of the two study participants. Trey is a gifted Black male attending a TWI. Bonner uses a conceptual cluster matrix to show (in a cross-sectional format) responses from the two participants along with responses of "critical others"—friends, instructors, and administrators who interacted with the participants from the study. Each statement relates to categories in Chapter 2 with a further discussion focused on relationships with faculty, and peer relationships. Overall, the categories and related statements are discussed, particularly within the context of the overarching research question: What are the perceptions of academically gifted African American males attending historically Black colleges or universities (HBCUs) and academically gifted African American males attending traditionally White institutions (TWIs) concerning their relationships with their respective institutions in cultivating their academic giftedness?

In the following chapter, Bonner further discusses Trey Williams' responses related to the other categories—family influence and support, college selection, self-perception, and the institutional environment. These categories are important as they have direct bearing on the perceptions of the participants and their experiences as African American males in a HBCU or a TWI. In this chapter, the responses bore direct relevance to the research question, which sought

to determine the participant's perceptions of giftedness at the TWI. The participants' perceptions of giftedness are relevant and important because they set the context in which they interpret their experiences in their individual higher education setting.

Chapter 7 shifts attention to the other participant—Stephen James, in the context of the HBCU. Similarly to Chapter 5, a grid displays his and “critical others” responses to issues related to relationships with faculty, peer relationships, family influence and support, college selection, self perception, and institutional environment. The grid is followed by in-depth discussions on relationships with faculty, peer relationships, and family influence and support.

The continuing discussion with Stephen James leads into Chapter 8 and addresses core perceptions related to the remaining categories—college selection, self-perception and institutional environment. This leads into Chapter 9 where Bonner reflects on the participants' experiences. Bonner's reflections are insightful as he highlights the significant differences between the individual cases. Of the number of differences highlighted in the chapter, there was specific attention given to the relationships each participant had with their respective faculty and academic institutions. In addition to these relationships, Bonner points to family as an important support structure. In particular, he addresses the role of parents in the academic achievement of the two gifted African American males. Self-perception and the institutional environment are discussed as two other areas bearing notable differences between the participants. Bonner emphasizes the importance of the institutional environment and highlights the impact of the culture and context on both college campuses.

Chapter 9 also presents significant data related to the research study as it draws attention to two grounded theories. These theories emerge from the interviews, observations, and data from written documents. They were developed in each case based on issues arising from institutional relationships, interactions with faculty, and individual perceptions on how the institutions harnessed and developed the gifted abilities of each participant.

In summary, Chapter 9 provides much of the substance of the research study. It presents recommendations and conclusions based on the study's data analysis and personal reflections from the author. For example, the study showed the importance of the institutional environment regardless of the demographic profile thereby highlighted the need for promoting collaboration in the higher education setting. The chapter also provides an avenue for raising important questions arising from the study and offering ideas on how to best serve the population of African American gifted males within the context of a HBCU or a TWI.

Chapters 10 and 11 provide an unusual but welcomed addition to the book. Bonner locates both Williams and James ten years after their initial interviews and re-interviews them. These chapters provide the interviewees with an opportunity to reflect on their accomplishments and the role their giftedness played in their lives since their undergraduate experiences. It also afforded them the chance to offer some retrospection on their lives and an opportunity to discuss how their experiences can be used to advise other African American gifted males. The reflections of the two interviewees seem cathartic and are presented in a way that helps the reader connect more deeply in the personal and professional growth of these two African American males.

The afterword, which proclaims Bonner's work as enlightening and gives readers much to consider, is followed by an expansive compilation of other scholarly work related to the issue of giftedness. These published pieces add a wealth of knowledge, as well as theoretical and practical perspective to this profound work. Overall, the book serves as an invaluable resource

for understanding and speaking to the distinctive circumstances of African American gifted males in college.

In his work, Bonner presents the relative importance of various factors (class size, potential relationships with faculty, institutional size, etc.) and expounds on how these influence college selection. Perhaps readers would connect with the participants more if Bonner provided a more complete portrait of Williams and James' particular backgrounds, such as socio-economic status and socio-cultural upbringing.

The major contribution of this book is that it offers a thoughtful exposure to the specific needs and circumstances of gifted African American males in college. It provides substantial and useful information for a wide population—college administrators, teacher training or faculty development programs, student mentors, curriculum and instructional designers, and even family members and friends of gifted African American males. Essentially, the book highlights the importance of both institutional and personal support structures for this population of students and creatively shows how these factors influence the success of African American males in college.