

“We are HERE”: Exploring Race Based Traumatic Stress with Black Graduate Women Using  
Sista Circle Methodology

by

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(Under the Direction of George McMahon)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation manuscript discusses race-based traumatic stress among Black Graduate Women in higher education settings using the approach Sista Healing Circle Methodology (SCM). This dissertation focuses on black graduate women in higher educational settings because history has shown that educational spaces have limited “space” for Black Women to be acknowledged in higher education (Bizzell, 2023; Stewart, 2017 & Tuitt 2010). Lack of acknowledgement, isolation and feeling of invisibility have been factors that contribute to racial stress. Research demonstrated that Black women often have no outlet to process the racial trauma and oppression they endure inside and outside of educational spaces (Daniel, 2018). However the use of having affinity spaces and mentoring groups have been shown to be effective interventions because they allow Black women to directly target psychological feelings of isolation, marginalization, a sense of belonging and invisibility (Apugo 2020; Coker et.al 2003; Jones & Pritchett-Johnson, 2018; Walkington, 2017) In conclusion findings from this dissertation include themes of: Never getting relief, Questioning Self, Spaces Matter, Discredited/Unheard, Discovering Ourselves, Community Building is vital and Healing is Dynamic. Findings from this study will allow counselors to understand how symptoms can present and how Black Women are handling the symptoms as their racial stress increases. Within this manuscript it will consist of a brief reflectivity to inform readers the internal process the researcher had experience before,

during and after study. Reflectivity allows the reader to understand the perspective of doing critical based research.

**INDEX WORDS:** Race Based Traumatic Stress, Sister Healing Circle, Counseling, Liberation, Black Graduate Women

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## DEDICATION

I have chosen to dedicate this dissertation to two of the people who have my heart. Ra'Ees Grimes thank you for being the most uplifting, loving and encouraging partner to me during this journey and in general. Kemali Grimes my beautiful daughter may you look at this dissertation and know who you are as a Black Woman. Thank you for pushing me and motivating me in ways I didn't know I needed. It's an honor to be your mother and happy you came during this doctoral journey.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it (Brown, 2012).

This dissertation manuscript discusses race-based traumatic stress among Black Graduate Women in higher education settings using the approach Sista Healing Circle Methodology (SCM). Black graduate women in higher educational settings are the focus of this dissertation because history has shown educational spaces have limited “space” for Black Women to be acknowledged in higher education (Bizzell, 2023; Stewart, 2017 & Tuitt, 2010). Research demonstrated that Black women often have no outlet to process the racial trauma and oppression they endure inside and outside of educational spaces (Daniel, 2018). Faculty and staff within higher educational institutions need to understand how various acts of oppression, trauma, and discrimination contribute to the success of students of color (Jones et al., 2018). Without appropriate or adequate support and interventions to help students of color who are dealing with racial trauma, their academic success, consisting of their self-efficacy, self-esteem, and feelings of shame, can be directly impacted (Franklin et al., 2006). When faculty and staff within higher educational institutions fail to address the impacts of racial trauma, it can create a destructive environment for students (Harrell,2000).

Shifting to focus specifically on the field of counseling within the counseling space, clients of color, directly and indirectly, bring the complications of their racial trauma to counselors (Singh, 2020). Many professional counselors have had to navigate

the counseling space without accurate direction/guidance on ways to help clients trying to process racial trauma (Hemmings & Evans, 2018). Counselors must acknowledge and effectively address racial trauma/race-based traumatic stress because, as professional counselors, it is the ethical duty to be able to provide culturally relevant interventions and have multicultural competence with diverse clients (Code C.2.A, ACA 2014). Outside of formalized professional ethics, it should be a moral duty as a counselor to acknowledge and effectively help a person of color going through racial stress that resulted from racial trauma. The implications of this study will provide ways mental health professionals can increase, construct, or enhance their approaches and interventions to address racial trauma with racial minority clients.

This dissertation will be strength-based. The reason for having a strength-based approach within the dissertation is due to the amount of race-based research saturating the scholarly literature that discusses the limitations experienced by people of color from a deficit framework (Silverman et al.,2023). To make this dissertation strength-based, it is essential to have the mission of uplifting, empowering, and amplifying the voices/experiences/narratives that will be reported in this study. Literature needs an awareness of the strengths and resiliencies that people of color developed from the various oppressive symptoms. Thus, in this dissertation, outside of the literature review, no deficit language will be used to describe the experiences of Black graduate women.

In what follows, this manuscript is organized into Chapter One, which serves as the introduction to the study. Chapter one provides a review of the literature on Race-Based Traumatic Stress (RBTS), the physical and emotional effects of RBTS, and a focus on how RBTS impacts Black graduate women in higher education. Chapter two explains

the Sista Circle Methodology by examining studies that have used this methodology along with the theories the researcher chooses to utilize to do Sista Circle Methodology. Understanding the tenets and framework of Sista Circle Methodology allows the reader to understand a way to explore experiences that is in a strength-based approach critically. Chapter three will present the findings from a research study that used Sista Circle Methodology with Black Graduate Women to explore Race-Based Traumatic Stress. Chapter three also discusses the research design, research questions, data collection and analysis, and implications for the counseling profession. The goal of Chapter Three is to provide evidence of real-life experiences while also setting a foundation for how healing can occur within the counseling space when Black women are going to their mental health professionals to process racial-based traumatic stress. Findings from this study will allow counselors to understand how symptoms can present and how Black Women are handling the symptoms as their racial stress increases. Chapter four will consist of a brief reflection to inform readers of the internal process the researcher experienced before, during, and after the study. Reflectivity allows the reader to understand the internal perspective of engaging in this research.

In conclusion, from the four chapters, one should be able to understand the origins of Race-Based Traumatic Stress and how it has impacted Black Graduate women. One should understand an appropriate methodological approach to engage in race-based research in a strength-based framework by understanding the Sista Circle Methodology used to explore Black Women's knowledge and narratives. Readers should also see an example of a study presented in chapter three, which reveals a critical approach to understanding the narratives in a liberating, non-deficit manner.

## **Key Definitions and Terms**

To understand the terms used in the dissertation below is a list of key terms along with their definitions as operationalized in this dissertation:

*Race*: "the social practice of categorizing people based on physical features and/or language" (Carter, 2007, p.18)

*Racial discrimination*: a combination of the ideology of racial superiority (racism) and social structures (Individual, institutional, or cultural levels) and interpersonal behaviors associated with dominance and oppression (Pieterse & Powell, 2016).

*Trauma*: a chronic form of stress from a particular event or series of events that can override a person coping mechanisms (Van der Kolk, 1998).

*Microaggression*: subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are put-downs (Pierce et al., 1978).

*Race Based Traumatic Stress*: an emotional and psychological stress response resulting from experiences of racial discrimination. In literature racial trauma and race based traumatic stress have been used interchangeably. (Carter et al., 2013).

*People of Color*: Within this manuscript, we are discussing individuals experiencing racial trauma who identify as Black/African, Latnix, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Native Indigenous. Individuals who have one or more (multiracial or biracial) of these racial identities are included in this category.

## **Trauma**

Trauma is a chronic form of stress from a particular event or series of events that can override a person's coping mechanisms (Van der Kolk, 1998). When one experiences trauma, they have psychological wounds/injuries due to the traumatic event (Carter,

2007). Trauma can be subjective; for example, two individuals can have the same event but experience/perceive the trauma differently. Each case of trauma impacts a person differently because the psychological effects on a person can be different.

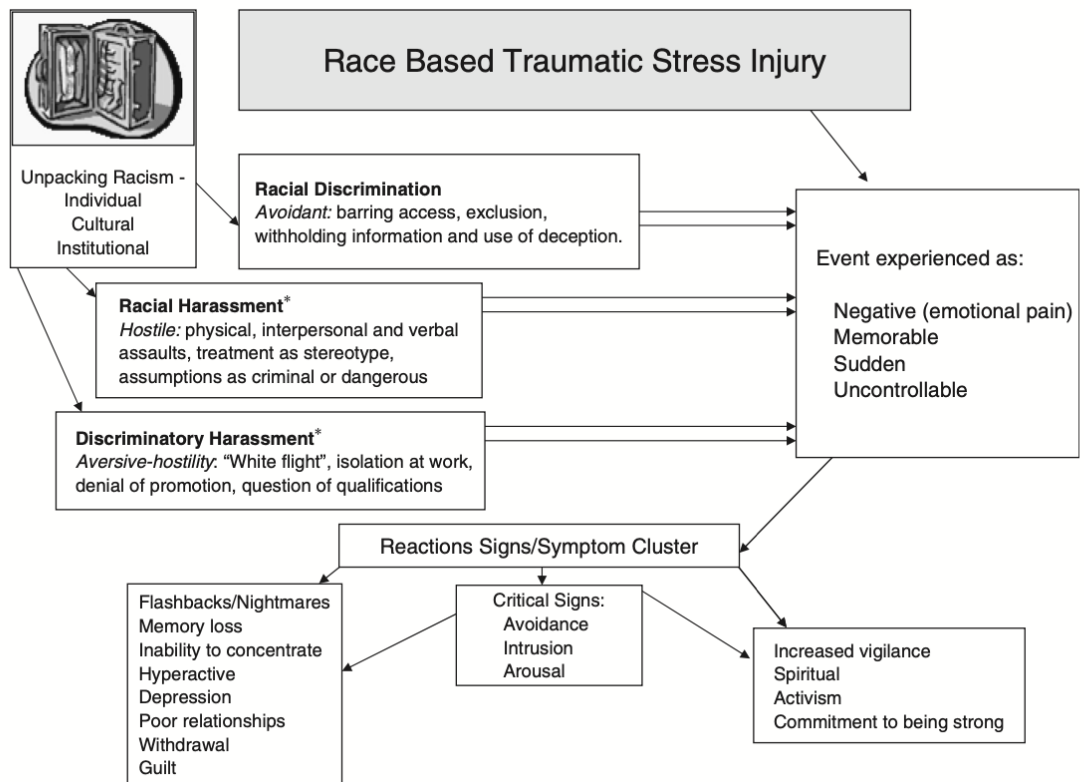
RBTS is defined as “The product of chronic stress caused by experiences of racism.” (Carter, 2007). Over the last few decades, researchers (Clark et al. 1999; Essed, 1991; Jones, 2002 Sue, 2003; Thompson, 2002; Utsey et al. 2002) have identified experiences of racist acts as one of the major components contributing to race-related life stress experienced by people of color. The origins of how RBTS is rooted in the chronic racial discrimination a person of color can receive. When the chronic and constant racial discrimination, isolation and even vicarious trauma occurs with no resolution the result can be chronic stress that can mimic symptoms (flashbacks, hypervigilance, agitation) of post-traumatic stress disorder (Carter, 2006). RBTS in previous studies (Bryant-Davis, 2007; Loo, Singh, Scurfield, & Kilauano, 1998, Sorsoli, 2007) have shown that RBTS can lead to anxiety, shame, inattention, depression, and low self-esteem.

### **Carter's Conceptual framework of Race Based Traumatic Stress Injury (2007)**

A framework was created (Carter, 2007) to help mental health professionals understand how Race Based Traumatic stress can occur and the symptoms that are generated from various types of racial harassment or discrimination. Within the model he uses the word “injury” to indicate the psychological damages that occur when people of color are encountering negative racial experiences. Within this model Carter shows racism can be encountered on an individual, cultural, or institutional level where the harassment or discrimination can be experienced as negative, memorable, sudden, or

uncontrollable (Carter, 2007). When these events are categorized in this manner it creates reactions such as withdrawal, guilt intrusion, arousal, and commitment to being strong (Carter, 2007). The conceptual model Carter and colleagues created has been a way to visually show how RBTS starts and the domino effect it creates when the experiences are seen as negative, memorable along with the reactions clusters it comes with. The conceptual model allows for mental health professionals to be able to understand how it can vary from a PTSD diagnosis by visually seeing the foundation of the trauma being different from the foundation of PTSD. The conceptual model from Carter (2007) is below:

Figure 1: Race Based Traumatic Stress Conceptual Model



**Historical Events of Racialized Trauma**

In the United States, people of color have been subject to various acts of racial, social, and economic oppression, including but not limited to slavery, Jim Crow, mass incarceration, and Japanese internment camps. Along with oppressive practices inflicted upon people of color, there have also been destructive portrayals and stereotypes that systematically dehumanize people of color. The systemic dehumanization of people of color takes shape in false ideologies created through the misuse of religious beliefs and the creation of propaganda surrounding images of people of color such as the Sambo (the “happy slave”), Mammy and Sapphire (Beane, et al., 1996; Collins 1990; Goings, 1994).

These stereotypes have been further perpetuated in modern media through negative images, stereotypes, and depictions of people of color in TV, film, and social media platforms (Cortese, 2010). White individuals mainly control the media that portrays these negative images, messages, and stereotypes (Morris, 2007; Vera & Gordon, 2003). Negative messages shown in media platforms that are controlled mainly by white people generate acts of invalidation and dismissal of people of color experiences, which can lead to what is known as micro-aggressions (Solórzano et al., 2000). Collins (1990, 1992) discusses the dangers of negative messages portrayed on media platforms. A fundamental tenet of Black Feminist Thought is the act of Black women reclaiming their selves and defining themselves due to having their identity blurred and misconstrued due to false images and messages about them.

The numerous anti-Black oppressive acts and unchangeable racist policies, structures, and laws contribute to the ongoing oppression of Black people in America. This is combined with the continued use of false messaging about people of color perpetuated in the media and pop culture. This context can lead to interpersonal behaviors

and feelings that can fall under racial discrimination. Racial discrimination is known as a combination of the ideology of racial superiority (racism) and social structures (Individual, institutional, or cultural levels) and interpersonal behaviors associated with dominance and oppression (Pieterse & Powell, 2016). Racial discrimination is vital to discuss due to it being the foundation of how race-based traumatic stress develops. Carter and colleagues (2007 & 2013) categorize racial discrimination into three different categories that can occur across individual, institutional, or cultural levels to people of color.

1. Avoidance- People of color are rejected/ignored because of their racial identity
2. Hostility- Verbal or non-verbal acts are directed at people of color to communicate and intimidate an inferior status to people of color due to their race
3. Aversive-Hostility- Where a person of color encounters a lack of opportunity or a hostile environment (ex., Work settings & school settings).

Examples of racial discrimination experienced by people of color include exclusion of social and work networks denial of resources (housing-redlining, school resources, accessibility to healthcare) lack of opportunities within employment and even placing rules/regulations on appearance of what is deemed professional. Carter and colleagues (2007) stated on an individual basis when one is excluded, denial of personal achievements and restrictions placed upon them due to their race it can lead to direct feelings of fear, confusion, anxiety, and anger.

On an institutional level when racial discrimination occurs it can reflect explicit and implicit rules regarding racism within an institutional. Carters and colleagues (2007) expressed that on an institutional level, the way explicit and implicit policies regarding

race are filed and handled can impact how people of color feel supported when racial discrimination or harassment occurs on institutional levels. At a cultural level, when experiencing racial discrimination, marginalized groups may develop adaptive behaviors such as working to prove dominant groups wrong or using their groups' experiences as a strength of resiliency. On a cultural level Carter (2007) reports that racially marginalized groups will avoid addressing the issue and learn to just re-adjust to their experiences they are going through with racial discrimination. The issue with cultural groups not addressing the issue and remaining silent will continue to perpetuate the racist systems set in place to continue acts of racial discrimination.

There has been consistent evidence (e.g. Chen & Mallory 2021; Lazarus & Folkman 1984; Utsey et al., 2008; Williams & Mohammed, 2013) demonstrating a direct connection between racial discrimination and adverse physical and mental health outcomes for people of color. The various acts of discrimination create a different level of stress where people of color will perceive their resources to be inadequate to meet the demands of their oppressive environment, which in turn leads to stress because of the individual's inability to cope (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Harrell (2000) has further defined this level of stress as racism-related stress, and it is not to be confused with "general stress." This stress level is in a different category because it is stress produced through race-related interactions between individuals/groups and the environment that are "perceived to tax or exceed existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being" (p.44).

Racial trauma results from the negative race-related experiences that become internalized, unprocessed, and chronic, which shape and change the perception of reality

for the person of color. It is important to note that when race-related stress goes unprocessed and internalized, not every person of color will identify their experience as traumatic as the perception of an experience will influence if a one identifies an experience as traumatic. To respect and allow for Black Graduate Women to define themselves following Collins (1990) tenet of self-definition this dissertation will focus on Black women who have identified their race-related experiences as traumatic and stressful.

### **Racial Trauma and Black individuals**

Since the 16th century African people have been forcibly removed by white colonizers and enslavers from various parts of Africa and relocated against their will to sites all over the globe, with most relocated to United States, Brazil, and Haiti, where they were held in involuntary enslavement and forced into labor (Ajayi, 1998). This violent relocation resulted not only in the displacement of people but the displacement of their culture, religion, and identity within Black individuals. Black individuals who were enslaved were the victims of severe brutality and dehumanization, which was a foundational tool to make Black individuals being seen as "less than" and "primitive" to justify slavery (Jones, 2004). Dehumanization occurred due to the United States' lack of protection laws and policies regarding slavery; this also resulted in white individuals believing Africans were inferior producing a racial hierarchy or caste system (Billingsley,

1968; Wilkerson, 2020). Slavery did not create racial hierarchies; there were racial hierarchies already in place to meet the needs of white colonization/white supremacy. To create racial hierarchies, whites had to distort the truth about who Black individuals were by stating lies about Black people that would convince society that they were inferior and less human and, therefore, there was no harm done to them in Slavery. These racial hierarchies helped keep laws in place by influencing policymakers that oppressive acts such as Slavery were justified (Ford, 2001).

Due to a racial hierarchy already set in place it caused slavery and other horrific structures and practices to be justified in society. It is important to report these historical contexts to understand how racial trauma has not been addressed due to it being the “norm” for hundreds of years to maintain the racial hierarchies set in place (Wilkerson, 2020). In history Black individuals being labeled as “less than” and “primitive” was the foundation for Black individuals’ trauma to be desensitized and not acknowledged in society.

Emancipation occurred in 1865, which resulted in the ending of legal slavery in America. In the post slavery era, however, Black individuals continued to be subjected to systemic oppression due to the constant view of being labeled by the acts of white supremacy as inferior to maintain the power structures put in place in America. Black individuals experienced acute systemic and legal oppression within the Reconstruction period where Blacks were given some but not all rights as whites to follow in America. The Reconstruction period was a way to continue to maintain racial hierarchies post slavery. In the Reconstruction period in the South there were laws called “Black Codes” where Black individuals could marry, own property, and sue in court. However, the

emancipatory reach of these codes was limited, and they had many restrictions including the fact that Black individuals could not serve on juries, serve in state militias, or testify against whites (Wilkerson, 2020).

During the reconstruction period various opportunities presented for Black people created a false perspective of freedom but ultimately made Black people inferior and little to no power. An example of this false freedom was Black people engaging in sharecropping. Blacks could lease land through sharecropping where they had to lease land from white farm owners. During this leasing Black individuals had to sign contracts with white landowners obligating their duty to work on the land. Signing these contracts created an agreement where Black individuals could not back out and if they refused to work, they were arrested and hired out for work (Du Bois 1935 & Foner 1988). During this period sharecropping was a way to provide cheap labor to the economy while still holding Blacks as inferior and less than and only benefiting the white farmers.

Sharecropping was a way to provide free labor post slavery in America. Other examples of systematic oppression toward Black individuals post slavery included being denied rights such as hospitals, state facilities, and poorhouses in the first 25 years after slavery due to being considered non-human (Billingsley, 1968). The constant denial of primary resources, rights, and laws, further amplified health disparities between white and Black individuals. Multi-generational oppression resulted from racial disparities that included low wages, high unemployment rates, capped income, the threat of violence, lower standardized test scores, and higher prison enrollment and crime victimization rates (Loury, 2002).

### **Trauma Experiences Today**

Currently, Black people continue to experience injustice, including racial profiling, verbal/physical assaults, stereotyping, microaggressions, and police brutality, along with the other disparities previously mentioned (Spann,2022). As a result, Black individuals are exposed to more racial discrimination than any other racial group within the United States (Chou et al., 2012). It is reported that 90% of Black adults and children have experienced direct traumatic racial experiences within their lifetime (Helms et al., 2012). Not only have Black individuals been exposed directly, but through the increase of technology, their vicarious trauma has increased through witnessing through social media outlets the violent killings of Black individuals. This was exemplified in the summer of 2020 when George Floyd's death was viewed nationally (Graham et al. 2020). This is not new, as Ida B. Wells (Wells, 2020) mapped and documented in her crusade against lynching in the 1800s. However, the use of technology has increased the frequency and accessibility of these violent images, exposing large masses of Black individuals witnessing violence and death done onto other Black individuals. The Vicarious Trauma Institute defines vicarious trauma as “an indirect exposure to trauma through a first-hand account or narrative of a traumatic event” (Izzo & Miller, 2010). An individual who has experienced vicarious trauma will not automatically lead to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) but can mimic symptoms of PTSD and place them at higher risk of developing PTSD. The psychological reaction of experiencing vicarious trauma includes an increased fear about one’s wellbeing, suspicion of others, social isolation, surrender of control to others and create negative view of personal and other motives (Renzetti & Edleson 2008; Everman 2001). With vicarious trauma on the rise, it can lead to collective trauma among Black individuals. Collective trauma is a psychological reaction to a

traumatic event that impacts a group of people, where the tragedy becomes a collective memory within the group (Hirschberger, 2018). Examples of collective trauma Black individuals have included Slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, integration, and many more events (Goosby & Heidbrink, 2013).

Dealing with collective and vicarious trauma can lead one (Blacks) to feel stationary when it comes to change and reframing their outlooks on race-based trauma. The constant state of being stuck on ways to process the collective, vicarious, and individual trauma can cause one to have negative psychological reactions and that often leads to negative cognitions, feelings, and behaviors. Race based traumatic stress can form in this stage when one is feeling stuck on their negative racial experiences and began to internalize the trauma where it leads to negatively impacting their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

### **Black People and Mental Health**

Intergenerational trauma and individual trauma to Black people has resulted in a lack of trust in various systems, including school systems, healthcare, legal systems, and even mental health care systems (Brown, 2003). Literature in the counseling field (Awosan et al., 2011; Campbell & Long, 2014; Neighbors, 1988; Sussman et al., 1987) has also shown that Black clients underutilize therapeutic services when compared with other racial identities. Black people are less likely to have mental health counseling and psychotherapy than white individuals, and one in three Black individuals who need mental health will receive it (Dalencour et al., 2017). Blacks are diagnosed more with schizophrenia versus mood disorders such as bipolar and major depressive disorder compared to white individuals (Bell et al., 2015). Compared to the general population,

African Americans are less likely to be offered evidence-based medication and/or therapy to treat various mental illnesses (Dalencour et al., 2017) and are more likely to be incarcerated than people of other races (Hawthorne et al., 2012; U.S Department of Justice 2015;). In the National Healthcare Disparities report (2008) it was identified that even when African Americans received a mental health diagnosis, they remained reluctant to seek mental health services.

Research shows that Black individuals are less likely to seek counseling services, yet less is understood about how the contextual factors of racialized trauma and race-based traumatic stress have impacted the lower numbers of Black individuals seeking services. Research which has considered this has forwarded several possible factors as to why Black individuals are less likely to seek counseling. Two of the most commonly cited reasons include (1) the impact of 400-plus years of being systematically labeled as "inferior" has resulted in Black individuals being uncertain and cautious when it comes to seeking mental health services (Davey & Watson, 2008); and (2) the lack of cultural understanding from mental health providers, of Black individual's experiences results in discomfort with engaging in services due to not being understood and fear of invalidation (Awosan et.al 2011). Within the counseling profession it has been noted that the problem is not that counselors do not want to work with race-related issues in counseling spaces; the problem is that there needs to be more training on how to address race-related issues when Black or other racially diverse individuals start counseling for race related issues (Hemmings and Evans 2018). Thus, a greater understanding of racial experiences and the impact of racial based traumatic stress on Black clients is needed to better serve clients in

the counseling space which can reduce the feelings of discomfort that arises in counseling services.

### **Race Based Traumatic Stress in Higher Education**

Higher educational settings have made marginal progress in acknowledging that racism exists for people of color attending their institutions (Banks, 1996). Since the 1960s, higher education institutions have developed courses focusing on diversity and multiculturalism for students and have developed offices and programs to support marginalized students. This influx of diversity and multiculturalism courses was a way to address students' diversity, which, on a surface level, was seen as achievement within institutions. However, this influx of multidisciplinary cultural courses caused further exclusion and contradiction due to the institution's inability to center the vulnerability of students with various oppressed identities (Ferguson, 2012). For faculty and staff, higher education institutions have increased the need for training that increases cultural awareness (Geyer, 1993). With the changes that institutions have made over the decades, much work still needs to be done to create a safe space for students of color attending these institutions.

In what follows, invisibility syndrome and microaggressions will be highlighted to discuss the influence these two variables have on students of color in higher education, followed by the psychological stress symptoms that come with invisibility syndrome and microaggressions as a student of color battling racial stress while managing their role as a student. These factors significantly contribute to students' lack of safety, trust, and confidence in higher educational spaces.

### **Invisibility Syndrome**

Identifying the scholarly work done in higher education will help higher education faculty know what needs to be explored with RBTS in institutions—looking at feelings of shame and low self-esteem, which are reported side effects of RBTS, in an educational setting, these symptoms can create what is known as invisibility syndrome. Invisibility syndrome occurs when one has feelings/beliefs that their personal talents, character or abilities are not valued or acknowledged by larger society due to racial prejudice (Lawson, 2019). Invisibility syndrome is created from the constant racial stress people of color experience (Franklin et al. 2006). When experiencing invisibility syndrome, students can feel their identity and talents are not valued in educational settings, impacting their self-efficacy in educational studies (Franklin 2004). Experiencing this phenomenon as a person of color has been defined as a “slight or microaggression” (Pierce, 1995). When one is impacted by this syndrome their “utilization of personal resources, achievement of individual goals, establishment of positive relationships, satisfaction of family interactions is impacted” (Franklin, 2004. p.11) Even though this research study will not directly focus on the details of this syndrome, it is essential to show an example of the cascade effects of RBTS has had on previous studies with students of color. In this study, we are not going into the interviews looking for this syndrome, but as researchers, we should prepare to see themes related to invisibility or other syndromes when understanding racial trauma narratives.

### **Microaggressions**

In higher educational settings, racism is often implicit or subtle rather than overt and is often experienced as microaggressions by people of color who are students and faculty within educational settings receive microaggressions (Sue, 2010). Subtle

microaggressions and racism in higher education are described as neoliberal color-blind racism. (Moore & Bell,2017). Moore and Bell (2017) described neoliberal color-blind racism as institutions asserting a decontextualized commitment to racial equality while simultaneously ignoring, distancing, or justifying their speech that contains racist undertones (Moore & Bell, 2017).

Racialized microaggressions have resulted in Black faculty and staff within higher education to develop maladaptive coping strategies including social withdrawal, self-criticism, and health (psychological)effects (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2018; Holder et al., 2015). When African Americans experience race related microaggressions it is reported that they detach themselves or work harder to prove to others they belong in the academic institution (Utsey et al., 2008). In trying to prove to others their worth, African Americans may invalidate their negative racialized experiences as a maladaptive coping skill to attempt to thrive in educational spaces (Thomas et al., 2008). The constant use of maladaptive coping skills not only does not resolve the root of race-based traumatic stress, but it will repress the experiences, feelings, and behaviors, which leads to a constant cycle of desensitizing negative racial experiences.

DeCuir-Gunby and colleagues (2018), looked at the impact of racial microaggressions and racial trauma on 15 African American faculty at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) and Historically Black College/University (HBCU) Universities and discovered that racism was prevalent within both higher educational settings. However, there was a significant difference in how racism was perceived in different higher education institutions (2-year institutions, 4-year institutions, PWI and HBCU). Faculty at HBCU's reported lower incidents of racial trauma and believed this

was due to the cultural aspects that consisted of constant racial uplift/resistance along with mentorship of students at HBCUs (Gasman et al., 2007). In PWI's and HBCU's alike, authors (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2018) identified that all faculty members at the various universities had engaged in more maladaptive coping strategies such as avoidance than adaptive strategies. Even though the focus of this study is on students, it is essential to note that not only students are affected by traumatic racial events. African American faculty are at increased risk for experiencing racism and racial discrimination in higher education workplaces (Offerman et al., 2014).

Racially marginalized students in a hostile environment at their institution can impact their sense of belonging and academic performance. The experiences that have been known to disrupt critical thinking, affective development and academic success includes Black students experiences of alienation, stereotyped, and tokenized in academic institutions (Chang et. al 2011).

### **Psychological Reactions to Trauma in Higher Ed**

When there is a failure address the impact of negative higher education spaces, racial inequalities at higher education institutions can be reinforced. For example, college/university curricula are often Eurocentric, which makes issues of race and racism seen as “something additional, extra, or disposable” (Andrew, 2019, p.1). Having a Eurocentric culture in higher education settings creates the risk of silencing students of color from advocating for themselves due to the constant need to maintain the dominant status quo, and the discomfort or consequences face when breaking cultural norms. Eurocentric culture in higher education settings also demonstrate to students of color that there is no space for them to insert anything outside of the dominant narrative.

The destructive and inflicted racial events that students and faculty of color can experience in higher education settings can lead to RBTS because the ongoing chronic racial discrimination that is not acknowledged can lead to a negative stress response (Offerman et al. 2014). Black individuals' "stress response can look like avoidance, repression, aggression and agitation" (Mellor p. 68 2004). It is important to note that everyone interprets their trauma differently meaning not all these negative events can lead a person of color to have race based traumatic stress (RBTS). However, research shows when there is complex racial trauma that continues to not be processed or addressed it can put Black individuals at higher risk for developing race based traumatic stress (Carter et al., 2013).

### **Black Graduate Women, Racial Trauma & Higher Education**

This dissertation contributes to literature on the effects of racial trauma effects along with healing approaches for Black graduate women. Previous studies have largely focused on Black undergraduate women's experiences regarding racial trauma examples include (Bizell 2023; Causey et al., 2022; Leath et al., 2023; Ward, 2023). Within the last 10 years, we have only started seeing research studies regarding Black graduate women and discussing their mental and emotional needs in navigating racial trauma. In the following section I will highlight some scholarly works that involves the Black Women experiencing adverse racial experiences while being students in higher educational institutions.

A study by McCabe (2009) explored race and gender microaggressions using qualitative approaches (one-on-one interviews and four focus groups) across three

different racial groups (Black, Latinx, and white) undergraduate students at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). The results detailed the Black women's (17 out of the total 82 participants) experiences of micro-aggressions and oppressive acts, which mainly occurred in the classroom. Other research has expanded on this finding of classroom-based microaggressions and found that in general, receiving microaggressions in the classroom can directly impact the ability to feel, be seen, and be heard, along with having self-efficacy to participate in class (Nadal et al., 2014). All these feelings of receiving microaggressions are directly connected to Black women's mental health. For example, microaggressions for Black students, in the classroom has been reported to lead to feelings of incompetence, increased anxiety, increased depressive symptoms, and increased suicidal thoughts (Hollingsworth et al., 2017). Events such as microaggressions and other forms of racial discrimination can produce risk factors for developing RBTS. Its import to focus on how microaggression impact students because it connects to their ability to succeed in academic spaces. Literature also states that Black women success rate is impacted with their ability to finish school when there is a feeling disconnect/exclusion from their graduate programs (Johnson-Bailey 2009). As stated previously, when these acts of discrimination are not addressed effectively, the feelings of isolation, depression, shame, and self-doubt can cause the chronic stress on the physical and mental state of an individual.

### **Misogynoir & Black Graduate Women**

Black graduate women are dealing with two oppressive intersecting identities: their gender and race, which have contributed significantly to their racial traumas (Apugo 2020 & Green et al. 2018). Being a Black woman in America creates the status of

“double minority” because being a Black woman in a white male dominated society presents challenges and discrimination within different systems (legal, political, and social). Double minority is defined as belonging to two groups associated with high levels of discrimination and classified as a minority status (Hirata, 2018). These two identities (Black and Woman) together in a white male-dominated society is often an isolating experience for Black women within higher educational spaces due to having to balance two oppressive but intersecting identities.

When researching with Black graduate women through narrative analysis Bailey (2004) explored the factors that hindered and contributed to Black graduate women success while also looking across how other identities Black women hold such as gender and class while in graduate school. Through this study Johnson-Bailey (2004) was able to identify four main factors that directly impact the way Black graduate women succeed. These factors were (1) having presence and mentoring from faculty, (2) networking with Black students, (3) respect from professors, and (4) continued funding. Within the study participants felt self-doubt and isolation when experiencing a lack of mentorship and respect from faculty within higher educational settings. Black graduate women felt a sense of exclusion when it came to funding opportunities due to many of them having to intentionally seek out funding without funding resources being discussed openly like white students had. Johnson-Bailey (2004) asserted that this lack of opportunities experienced by Black Graduate women in academic settings mimics what happens on a cultural level to Black people.

Additionally, Johnson Bailey’s (2004) study emphasized the ways that Black women experienced oppression through their intersectional identities. Intersectionality

will be further discussed in Chapter two, but it is important to highlight that having at least two oppressive identities can produce experiences of hyper visibility or invisibility and magnify marginalizing experiences for Black women. (Crenshaw, 1991).

Losing one's identity to assimilate to environments not open to differences is an experience people of color deal with often within different settings. Alexander highlights this experience when examining Black graduate women in graduate programs (2022). Black graduate women in these educational spaces are continuously experiencing misogynoir within these spaces, which is contributing to oppressive experiences. *Misogynoir*, defined as the ingrained prejudice misogyny placed on Black women in society (Bailey, 2014), is reported as a contributing factor to racial trauma because Black women constantly function in space that has been maintained for white individuals (Collins, 1990). While in these spaces, Black women are labeled as intruders in these educational spaces, which can contribute to implicit and explicit biases, beliefs, and, ultimately, acts of oppression (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). Black women must use political strategy to survive and thrive in these spaces due to academic institutions' misogynoir and historical contexts (Alexander, 2022), creating a vicious cycle of not directly addressing the stressors and allowing spaces, such as educational, to continue to function in ways that continue to ignore/silence Black Women.

Black Graduate women are dealing with multiple variables of oppression simultaneously. Examples include trying to navigate graduate school in predominantly white spaces, finding mentorship to succeed in graduate school, and dealing with the misrepresentation that consists of stereotypes, images, and beliefs in these spaces (Apugo, 2017). Balancing all these variables leads to feelings of imposter syndrome,

where students believe they should not be allowed to be in higher educational spaces. Black Graduate women have also felt they are tokenized within graduate programs as a student that adds diversity versus a student that can bring valuable information and insight into a higher educational space (Love, 2017). These various experiences have all shown a direct negative impact on academic success and opportunity within the academic spaces.

### **Healing Spaces**

To combat the effects of racial trauma, Black Graduate Women's engage in mentorship, peer relationships such as an affinity group, and informal support groups. These shared and sacred spaces have allowed Black Women to directly target psychological feelings of isolation, marginalization, a sense of belonging, and invisibility (Apugo 2020; Coker et. al 2003; Jones & Pritchett-Johnson, 2018; Walkington 2017). What is missing from the literature is an understanding of the oppressive experiences Black Women endure as Racial trauma or race based traumatic stress from the perspective of the women themselves. There have been studies that look at Black women's experiences within the field of higher education, but what has not been explored or studied is a specific examination of this through the lens of race-based traumatic stress. This omission raises questions of whether we are dismissing these acts of trauma by not calling it out? What if there is not enough information for counselors to understand what these chronic ongoing oppressive acts are to people of color? Due to the ongoing chronic adverse historical events, have we (America) become desensitized to trauma when it directly impacts people of color that we simply do not view these experiences as trauma, and it is just the norm for marginalized populations? The research detailed in Chapter

three will add to the literature on Black Graduate women through the lens of RBTS and also contribute to the specific implications for the counseling field.

The literature focusing on Black graduate women begs future research questions about where and how Black women can reclaim these oppressive spaces. How can Black Women combat all these variables listed in this section noted by research studies over the last ten years? Literature is scarce regarding ways Black women can find uplifting and empowerment when dealing with racial stress while maintaining the duties/barriers of being graduate students. It is vital to continue to add to the literature regarding how healing spaces can reframe and normalize experiences for Black women while also providing positive solutions for Black women to handle their stress regarding racial trauma.

### **Conclusion**

Even with higher educational spaces including more diversity, equity, and inclusion classes, programs, and training, Black women continue to experience invisibility, lack of belonging and marginalization experiences they have had for decades in academic spaces. How are these spaces implementing inclusive interventions/approaches, but Black women are still experiencing what they are experiencing? Where exactly is the barrier between identifying oppression and addressing it effectively within these higher educational spaces? This dissertation will answer some of these questions above about how Black graduate women are experiencing their selves within higher education spaces, along with understanding how they are navigating invisibility, microaggressions, and marginalization. The dissertation can also serve as an

awareness and call to action for educational settings to be aware of the stressors and barriers Black graduate women are experiencing inside academic spaces and personally.

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CHAPTER 2  
SISTA CIRCLE METHODOLOGY: A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OR  
POSSIBLE COUNSELING INTERVENTION?<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

This chapter will discuss how to address the problem through a critical methodology of Black graduate women dealing with racial stress while attending higher education settings. Within the chapter, I will explain the Sista Circle Methodology and how it can be utilized to help Black Women process their racial stress. Along with explaining the methodology, I will explain the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory and Black Feminist Thought that align with using the Sista circle methodology in scholarly research.

Sista Circle Methodology aims to provide a liberating space for Black Graduate Women (BGW) to discuss their racial trauma and foster a healing space to process and find empowerment from these experiences. Often, BGWs do not have the space to process the racial trauma they are experiencing, which includes social isolation, anxiety,

and lack of mentorship inside and outside of educational spaces due to having to navigate many other variables in educational spaces. When Black Graduate women are experiencing this, it can contribute to their race-based traumatic stress symptoms. Race-Based Traumatic Stress is a term used to describe the chronic race-based stress marginalized individuals are experiencing. Regarding the counseling profession, counselors do not have much knowledge or intervention to address racially diverse individuals experiencing racial trauma (Hemmings & Evans, 2018). Race-Based Traumatic Stress is a term used to describe the chronic race-based stress marginalized individuals are experiencing

### **Introduction**

Latoya Johnson (2015), the creator of the sista circle methodology (SCM), defined this methodology as "a qualitative research methodology and support group for examining the lived experiences of Black women" (p. 43). It is crucial to note that although SCM is a new concept within research spaces; Black women have been doing sista circles outside of research spaces for over 100 years (Giddings, 1984). Sista circles were created and classified as Black Women's clubs as a response to Black Women being excluded from white female spaces and Black male spaces (Giddings, 1984). Sista circles exist directly in the community where Black women reside, and the goal was to provide them with support, help, knowledge, and encouragement (Boyd, 1993; Giddings, 1984). Within a sista circle, Black Women build on a sense of collectivism and existing kinship

networks (Neal-Barnett, 2011). Building on a sense of collectivist approach within a sista circle means utilizing a team approach to discuss various things and make group decisions based on a consensus rather than individually being part of a group.

Typically, sista circles consisted of Black women within the same organization brought together through a common theme (e.g., love of books, self-care, and health). When sista circles are health-focused, they are led by a Black women medical expert, and the goal within health focus circles is to promote physical well-being and provide medical education to Black women. An example of a health focused group that infuses sister circle tenets along with health education is a group called Healer Women Fighting Disease which is a group of consisting of HIV and substance abuse prevention for African American women led by a trained facilitator (Gilbert & Goddard, 2007).

Sista circles have also been utilized for group therapy for Black women by being led by a mental health professional and connecting Black women who have similar mental health concerns and diagnoses (Boyd, 1993). A Black psychotherapist utilized the foundation of sista circles to gather Black women who had self-esteem issues that impacted their social relationships, maintaining work duties, and other aspects. In her book titled *In the Company of My Sisters* (1993), she reports this group experience by reporting that within the group, Black women were able to process the various roles and images Black women hold along with a shared history that influences self-esteem and outlook on stressors.

Further looking into the mental health field, sista circles have been proposed by a few scholars as a culturally relevant intervention within a cognitive behavioral therapy lens and has been utilized as a group intervention to specifically target anxiety and panic

disorders within Black women (Gaston et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2009; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). The scholars who have utilized sista circles as a group intervention to target anxiety acknowledged that there is more research work to do regarding understanding the effectiveness of using sista circles as an anxiety intervention. Most scholars who have engaged in sista circles as a group intervention reported their findings as preliminary.

### **Sista Circles in Research**

Sista Circles have been around for hundreds of years, rooted in Black churches and the Black women's club movement. Sista circles have been a supporting tool to Black women but using Sista Circles as a method of data collection in academic research is new within the last 15 years. In the following section I provide an overview of studies that have used this methodology, concluding with a synthesis of the main tenets of this methodology.

Johnson (2015) used sista circles to examine Black Women teachers' experiences by viewing their challenges and exploring the mentoring and support they received inside and outside of schools. Johnson (2015) highlighted that using sista circles allowed for extended mentoring towards these Black Women identifying as educators and doing culturally sound research. The ability to allow and extend mentorship was cultivated within the sista circle Johnson hosted because each Black woman was able to value, support, and guide each other in a way that started the foundation for mentorship. In some of her shared results on how women viewed the benefits of the sista circle, women made statements of feeling not alone, expressed concerns they repressed, and a sense of satisfaction.

Johnson (2015) used several types of data that consisted of pre-interviews (recorded), sista circles (videotaped), journal entries, and post-interviews (recorded), with the sista circles Johnson reported being the primary data collection method. Johnson (2015) reported each circle focused on a theme relevant to her research questions. She used a three-step process by adapting Miles and Huberman's method (1994) of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.

Dunmeyer (2022) used sista circles to highlight the importance of using this methodology to resist the oppressive forces Black women endure. In the article, they highlight two studies where one of the authors (Shauri-Webb, 2019) used sista circles for Black Middle school girls to identify the effects of white supremacist ideologies on their experiences in school. The use of sista circles in the study allowed the Black girls to have the space to talk about their various oppressions and build community. In this study, the author (Shauri-Webb, 2019) highlights the shift from discussing the Black girl's experiences of various acts of oppression with the school to seeking mentorship, liberation, healing, and reframing after completing sista circles. Organically, as the sista circles continued, the sistas in the circle were able to take a positive and healing approach to handle their oppression of being Black girls.

Dunmeyer (2019) used sista circles to study how Black women teachers understand race, gender, and class, contributing to their experience in secondary schools. In conclusion, Dunmeyer shared that using the sista circle methodology allowed the Black women to discuss critically and re-examine their daily experiences that involved racism, classism, and sexism and that influenced their narratives within the circle. This study highlights how using sista circles allowed Black women educators to unpack and

separate themselves from distorted images/stereotypes and understand who they are individually. The sista circle also allowed collective identification and healing where the Black Women educators could re-center their roles and expectations as Black Women educators.

Lacy (2017) used sista circles to explore how Black Graduate women on college campuses make meaning from media representations of themselves and explored how the media impacts the meaning and self-definition of Black Women. Using the sista circles allowed Lacy (2017) to reveal themes of Black Women's self-sacrificing and the need to create space within higher educational settings. Lacy (2017) highlighted the need for intentional healing spaces for Black Women as they seek various graduate degrees due to the women within the group expressing the critical need for more spaces.

Palmer (2021) used sista circles in her dissertation study to explore the experiences of Black Women in doctoral education studies navigating gendered racial microaggressions and how they generate knowledge in the community with each other. She discussed how the knowledge the Black Women shared helped normalize the experiences and develop community through "Black womanness". Palmer (2021) expressed that using the sista circles invited narratives of "unfiltered realities of academia" and sharing wisdom collectively on how Black women can navigate the impact of the disruption of whiteness.

Cokley (2020) used sista circle methodology in her dissertation internationally at a Montessori school in Ghana, West Africa, to work with six Middle school Black girls to explore experiences of Black girl giftedness. Themes that resulted from having a healing sista circle methodology included: "sista circles being spaces of affirmation and

encouragement for Black girls in giftedness, Black girl (gift)edness is a cultural/spiritual gift and knowing who you are" (self-definition). The sistas that were part of the circle expressed that they could share things about their culture with the researcher (Cokley) due to the nature of the sista circle methodology where the researcher is the participant. Participants shared feeling affirmed and emotionally supported to process their experiences in sista healing circles.

Across all the studies mentioned above, all the scholars share how using sista circles methodology allowed information and knowledge to come organically within the circles. Each of the scholars mentioned how sistas within the group were able to have the opportunity to redefine their selves from the various oppressive labels placed upon them. The process of redefining and coming together came naturally due to the shared everyday experiences and the breakdown of historical contexts of various images/beliefs of Black women.

One of the gaps noted in the studies above was that each consisted of sista circles, with only 3-6 circles (meetings) per study. This could be because most of the studies mentioned are dissertation studies where time constraints often occur. However, as researchers continue to think about using sista circle methodology to engage in research with Black women, it would be interesting to see studies where sista circles are extended past 6 circles in total. Surpassing 6 circles total will allow researchers to see sista circles' long-term use and benefits. Having more circles would also allow for relationships within the group to develop further and for group cohesion to occur, which could lead to deeper insights and meaning generation.

Another gap noted in the Sista Circle studies is that all the studies above occur with individuals within a school setting, whether students or educators. If this methodology has revealed healing properties, what have been the barriers to doing sista circle methodology studies within counseling and mental health spaces with Black women in communities outside of academia? Questions to explore further are how the results vary when working with Black women in a local community versus Black women or girls all connecting due to being in the same place academically? Along with further exploring extending the frequency of sista circles and how it would influence results? Providing answers to these will possibly allow for more awareness and acceptance of sista circle to serve as a healing component and possible mental health intervention for Black women processing racial stressors.

### **Sista Circle Methodology Tenets**

Collecting data using SCM is similar to focus groups in that the researcher is the person who observes and facilitates the participants regarding the dialogue taking place within the group (Lacy, 2017). However, three main concepts set sista circles differently from focus group methodologies in qualitative research. The three tenets are communication dynamics, the centrality of empowerment, and researchers as the sista scholar (Johnson, 2015). From a qualitative perspective, SCM is a critical qualitative inquiry because it centers on humanizing the participants.

Critical inquiry pushes for liberation and emancipation during the research process by examining the roles that researchers and participants play, data collection, and analysis of data (Paris & Winn, 2013). Sista circles promote a critical approach due to its

ability to eliminate power dynamics by having the researcher be a part of the circle and viewing the sistas as experts who can collectively and separately provide narratives. Sista circles are critical because they interrupt the status quo and centralize how Black women communicate. Due to SCM being a critical qualitative method, Jones (2016) argues that SCM does not compete with or replace traditional qualitative paradigms; instead, SCM challenges and contributes to the body of knowledge regarding Black Women.

#### *Communication dynamics*

There is a way Black women communicate with other Black Women. Examples can be how Black women use non-verbal and verbal communication, phrases, inflections, and even completion of each other sentences. Patricia Collins (1986) has highlighted the need for Black Women to have a space to feel safe, supported, and validated. Within a sista circle space, a sista (participant) should not feel like she must mask her language, body language, or another way of being. In the above studies this was demonstrated by some of the scholars' video recorded their circles to capture those nonverbal dynamics and finishing each other sentences. These scholars who did choose to use video recording utilized the videos as part of their analysis to identify implicit themes.

#### *The centrality of empowerment*

The centrality of empowerment emphasizes women's importance in reclaiming the definitions and realities falsely written about Black Women. Not only is empowerment the goal on an individual level with this tenet, but this tenet addresses the importance of self-accountability to encourage other Black Women to share and care about other Black Women's stories to continue to empower Black Women (Collins, 2000). Each study mentioned through their research questions the ability for the sistas to

redefine themselves and the ability to do so ultimately empowers the sistas. To redefine themselves some studies consisted of showing various clips of Black women in media and having discussions about false ideologies or images of Black women and moving into discussions on how to not internalize these false representations.

### *Researcher as Sista Scholar*

What makes SCM stand out from focus groups is its ability to include the researcher within the sacred space. The researcher is not a guide or facilitator in the group process. The researcher is an active participant within the circle, which means the researcher must identify as a 'sista.' The researcher will share their personal experiences with the sistas part of the circle to look for healing and collaboration. This elimination of the traditional power dynamics between the researcher and the participants holds the researcher accountable to the sista circles' primary focus on giving and sharing with each other to help each other both change and heal from whatever topic is discussed (Dillard, 2006; Johnson, 2015). Lacy (2017) within her study implements this ability to balance between a researcher and sista within the circle by planning each sista circle one at a time to take account what is the issues being discussed at each circle and taking account the groups decision about where to take each group. Lacy (2017) throughout her study did not just enforce what she thought was best for the research she allowed the topics to flow organically around her research questions.

### **Theoretical Lens within Sista Circle Methodology**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Feminist Thought (BFT) both align with Sista Circle Methodology and are used to understand better the participants and context of race-based traumatic stress. Having a theory to inform your methodology and research

is essential to help design research questions, inform the scope of the literature to be reviewed, and provide/highlight explanations within the theoretical framework to explain the underlying causes/influences of phenomena within qualitative research. In the following sections, I detail each theory as a framework and then explain how they can be integrated when utilizing Sista Circle Methodology.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory is developed from the larger school of Critical theories, which aim to dismantle the various institutional structures that produce oppressive ideologies and social inequalities by going beyond the surface level and identifying the structures that have caused various forms of oppression (Shroeder & Hollister, 2014). Canella (2010) states, "All critical theories question the status quo in Western thought, culture, and society. By asking who or what is heard? Who or what is silenced? Who is disqualified? How are forms of inclusion and exclusion created?" (p.7). In relation to utilizing Sista Circle Methodology this quote highlights the goal of the methodology being a method to cultivate silent narratives. Silent narratives are exposed because the sistas within the circle are encouraged and empowered to release stories and experiences that they generally repressed and internalized. Using a critical race theory lens within Sista Circle Methodology also will allow the excluded to be included by bringing in experiences that are often disregarded to remain the status quo of systemic issues.

Critical Race Theory's (CRT) aim is to take a "critical" lens on the identity of race by asking similar questions that Canella (2010) proposes, but with a specific focus on racial identity. CRT aims to address, attack, and expose institutional racism by highlighting discriminatory practices built within our American society. Critical Race

theorists do not believe in "Freedom or Liberation can be achieved in America until the ideologies that America was built on are deconstructed (Matsuda et al., 1993). From a critical theorist's perspective, Liberation is more than a word; it is the end goal with multiple steps that entails breaking down the various systems. Being critical is daunting because a critical race theorist purposely goes against the status quo to create change and foster healing.

### **Tenets of CRT**

There are several core tenants of CRT that provide a foundation for using CRT as a theoretical lens and inform the methodology of the data analysis of a Sista Circle Methodology study. These tenets include intersectionality of race, revisionist history, critique of liberalism, color blindness, interest convergence, ordinariness of racism and counter story telling.

#### *Intersectionality of Race*

Intersectionality of race acknowledges that racism is been embedded throughout society and socio-cultural interactions that intersect with other social identities (social class, sexual orientation, migration status, gender) (Crenshaw 1995). Intersectionality encourages a more complex conceptualization of individuals experiencing oppression and understanding that the effects of race and discrimination marginalized individuals experience are different between everyone, and within individuals across multiple identities.

Utilizing CRT allows a researcher to have a better understanding of how to address systems and multicultural issues that have created a barrier because they understand the foundation on how systemic racism occurred. Highlighting

intersectionality also considers that we honor the complexity of being a Black Graduate Woman by realizing we hold roles that goes beyond our racial identities. We take a holistic approach by analyzing and conceptualizing all their different identities within their racial trauma.

### *Revisionist history*

Delgado & Stefancic summarized revisionist history as history that reexamines America's historical events and replaces majority interpretations of events by reframing history to include minorities' experiences (2017). Delgado and Stefancic (2017) report Critical race theory goal with revising American history is to include the realities of racial struggles that have been silenced to maintain a status quo. When looking at this theme of CRT, it is essential to understand how it can disrupt systems in place. This theme can be a disrupter because it is changing what we have chosen to believe through the eyes of a system created only to highlight the majority population and replace history to hear authentic realities from people of color. I believe we cannot begin to break down various systems without understanding the actual realities of marginalized experiences. In the *sista circles* methodology this tenet helps to develop researcher knowledge and understanding of how historical history has contributed to the racial trauma marginalized individuals are experiencing today.

### *Critique of liberalism and color blindness*

CRT critiques the liberalism stance on that everyone can have equal treatment regardless of historical histories or current situations (Solórzano & Yossi, 2002). Critiquing liberalism is a foundation of CRT because liberalism disregards the racial inequities people of color have endured throughout American Society (Bell, 1995).

Having a "we are equal" approach can further suppress marginalized voices due to not acknowledging racism and discrimination. In the sista circle groups, it is essential not to make colorblind statements that create false hope about our reality. In the Sista circle group, participants should have hope that racism will be diminished, but we have to be realistic with our expectations of healing and how healing can occur within these circles. A colorblind approach may be an unintentional way to want to develop that hope in clients, which can be harmful and unethical due to not acknowledging the racial inequities that prevent us from being equal individuals in society.

### *Interest Convergence*

The tenet of interest convergence identifies all forms of racism advanced in the interest of Whites (Bell, 1980). Bell (1980) explains that White individuals will only support social justice to the point that it will benefit/interest them. When discussing interest convergence, Mastuda and others state that CRT highlights how minority groups are subjected to the majority groups in terms of power and privilege (Mastuda et al., 1993). As Bell states, racism is always present and ingrained in society (Bell, 1987;1992), making social justice progress towards marginalized individuals a challenge to overcome. This tenet will be accounted for in Sista Circle Methodology because, as a researcher, it helps have a better understanding of participants understand that this study will not eliminate racism due to racism being embedded in societal norms. Having this tenet within this research study would help participants understand that it is critical to focus on what they can control versus things they do not have control over.

### *Ordinariness of Racism*

The ordinariness of racism refers to the fact that racism exists and is permanently embedded and is infused within America's culture to such a degree that it can appear normal and natural to people (Delgado, 1995). Therefore, CRT theorists disapprove of the act of "colorblindness" because it ignores racism being embedded in society and its systems (Givens, 2008). When one develops to have a colorblind approach, the consequence of this approach results in not acknowledging the various systems of oppression that have created racism. People who develop a colorblind approach reinforces the status quo of racism. Examples of colorblindness include people saying, "We are all the same," "We are all human," and "We are all equal." Using a colorblind approach denies and minimizes people's lived experiences, especially people of color. Knowing that racism is infused in American culture can make it difficult for a critical race theorist to expose these oppressive systems because the various systems have prospered for so long without any interference.

### *Counter Storytelling*

CRT honors and what makes this theory appropriate for qualitative methods are honoring storytelling. *Storytelling* is the narratives others provide that detail their lived experiences (Solórzano, 1997). CRT honors storytelling because it deconstructs race-related paradigms while simultaneously challenging research that deemphasizes the importance of race (Solórzano, 1997 & 1998). CRT categorizes the narratives. First, there are stock stories which are stories/narratives that explain why things are in the ways that satisfy the dominant culture. Then there are counter stories which are narratives/stories that provide first-person accounts that disrupt the stock stories and contradict the stock stories (Givens, 2008). Stock stories we have seen throughout American culture,

especially in educational systems where history class is taught in ways that support the dominant voice and narratives. Counter Story telling tenet allows counselors to understand the client's worldview by using the narratives reported on how racism has affected clients (Trahan et al., 2019). Understanding the client's worldview is essential to apply interventions that will be appropriate and aligned with the client's needs.

Counselors could lack awareness and empathetic understanding when working with clients of color without this CRT tenet of counter-storytelling. Counselors must embrace this tenet to get to the root of racial traumas.

In summary using CRT theory to engage in sista circle methodology aligns with the methodology because sista circles allows a space for counter storytelling to be valued and heard. Sista circles allow for racism to take center stage and to be understood as extraordinary even in its omnipresence. Sistas counter stories are in sista circles are not only centered but they are believed and valued as truth. Sista circle tenets allow for a naturally provide a space for critical examination of race and power.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

*"Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients help justify women's oppression" (Collins, 2008, p.77).*

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is a critical social theory that provides Black women with the tools to resist intersecting oppressions. (Hills-Collins, 1991). Founded by Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought, focuses on the objectification of black women as the "other/objects,". Objectivism serves as a clear purpose in a racist society, because when one is classified as the "other/objects," their reality can be defined by others and created by others who do not identify or belong to the group. The harm that

can be done when Black women are defined by people who are not Black women can create false negative beliefs and negative ideologies which Black women can internalize.

Burkhard cites similar statements as Collins: "Black women are invisible, seen through only stereotypical manifestations yet simultaneously hypervisible" (Ferdinand, 2018, p.53). Black women's complexities are ignored, instead reducing Black Women to clear and simple stereotypes, keeping Black Women and restrained within over-produced narratives that do not define them. Collins provides historical contexts and meaning as to why things are the way they are towards Black Women. Society and its institutions' push to silence, label others, and narrate Black lives to eliminates the multiple complexities Black lives carry.

Black Feminist thought fits with sista circle methodology because BFT is a critical social theory that questions and expose bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that Black Women are facing daily (Collins, 2000). BFT allows one to understand the Black Women's lived experiences and aims to shift any negative lived experiences a Black Women faces. When engaging in BFT through a research lens, one understands that BFT contains general "knowledge that helps U.S Black women survive, in, cope with and resist differential treatment" (Collins, 2000, p. 35). Engaging in BFT acknowledges that Black Women's knowledge is acquired through various experiences that consist of living, surviving, and thriving within multiple forms of oppression (Collins, 2000).

Using BFT with research the participants within a sista circle will invite healing, empowerment, and knowledge of the negative racial experiences the Black women in sista circles share. Providing contextual knowledge through this lens can help women

reframe their experiences by taking any negative internalization from themselves and understanding how society has facilitated these negative racial experiences. BFT aims to highlight the assumption that Black Women are not monolithic. When combined, black women and their experiences offer complementary and contradictory experiences across the spectrum of intersectional identities. BFT is an act of resistance due to its ability to open possibilities for Black Women to resist oppressive forces that limit self-empowerment (Collins, 1996).

When using BFT as a researcher, it is at the forefront of such critical research ideas as making multiple truths visible, including the interests and values of the participants as a collective, and creating opportunities for self-definition through Black Women's lived experience (Collins, 1986). Within the *sista circles*, this eliminates participants from telling their stories in a "correct" or "right" way because all truths are welcomed and honored in the group. This lens also prevents judgment when listening to other women's narratives. When engaging in this theory, it is assumed that the researcher and participants understand that everyone's story is essential to hear and validate to engage in a collective experience within the *sista circles*.

### **Tenets of BFT**

#### *Outsider Within*

Black women cannot be aligned entirely with feminist or Black social thought because the feminist thought foundation resides in whiteness, and black social thoughts center around maleness (Collins, 1986). This acknowledges that belonging for Black women cannot exist due to not having a cultural fit between their (Black Women) experiences and the dominant group (Collins, 2002). As a researcher using *sista circle*

methodology being aware of this tenet will help understand the narratives Black women may share within the circles that centers around isolation and not fitting in various environments.

### *Intellectual activisms*

Intellectual activism highlights the ability to of reclaiming "black feminist intellectual traditions" and centering the intellectual work of Black women. Collins (2000) emphasizes that intellectual thought is more than just scholarly writing. It can be music, poetry, or art. In the sista circle methodology, various artifacts such as artwork or music that is impactful and carries the same weight as hearing counternarratives and create a healing space. Intellectual thought is often disregarded when expressive methods are used, and this methodology (Sista Circle Methodology) will debunk that through the use of allowing artifacts as a form of data collection.

### *Matrix of domination*

The matrix of domination in a BFT lens refers to the intersections Black Women have that are oppressed and structurally organized. This tenet highlights the intersectionality of a Black woman by discussing how race, gender, socioeconomic status, age, and sexuality impact a Black woman's experiences. Collins (2000) organized the matrix of domination into four domains: The disciplinary domain, the hegemonic domain, the structural domain, and the interpersonal domain. Collins explains the Disciplinary domain: it consists of managing oppression in attempts to sustain it. Hegemonic domain: The goal is to legitimize oppression. Structural domain: The function is to organize power and oppression. The interpersonal domain controls the intersections and consciousness of individuals (Collins, 2000). Black women intersect in

all four of these different domains of oppression, but each carries a different experience/narrative to how they are experiencing these intersecting domains (Collins, 1989). It is critical to acknowledge the matrix of domination when working with BGW in the *sista circle* because these women bring more than identities than just identifying as Black women and graduate students into the space. These BGW are coming in with multiple identities that could be areas of oppression and privilege directly impacting their experiences because they are Black Women. As a researcher, I must understand this when analyzing and producing themes.

### *Controlling Images*

Controlling images of Black Women who originated during slavery and continue to manifest in society can make Black women's oppression seem natural and normal (desensitizes society to these images) (Collins, 2000). The concept of controlling images focuses on the negative stereotypical representations and images of Black women. These images justify the oppressive acts Black Women receive (Collins, 1991). Examples of controlling images that Black Women have had labeled on them include "mammies, matriarchs, welfare mother and jezebels." These images will be discussed in the *sista circle* group to acknowledge how this has induced racial trauma. Discussing this aims to provide insight to readers (counselors, educators, institutions) reading this study on ways they have contributed to encouraging these negative stereotypical representations. This tenet will help BGW acknowledge how they have disregarded their trauma as "normal" and learn to combat these "normal" occurrences due to the images produced about them.

### *Self-Definition*

Self-definition in BFT gives Black Women the power to name one's reality (Collins, 2000). A way to define self, Collins believes Black women have to resist the controlling images used to categorize Black Women. When these images are resistant and rejected, Black Women can create their self-definition in a phenomenon Collins (2000) calls "collective Black women's consciousness." To promote self-definition, Collins expresses that Black Women need to be in "safe spaces" where their thoughts and narratives are not objectified or silenced by others. When Black Women are self-defining, they are moving consciousness thinking that limits them to a free mindset (Collins, 1986). This tenet will be used in the sista circles as there will be an emphasis on honoring and respecting everyone's narrative. The sista circles will be a healed space due to having a private, confidential setting during each meeting. It is a goal for women in the circle to self-define to promote healing and liberation from the racial trauma narratives they choose to share in the sista circles.

### **Black Feminist Thought & Critical Race Theory Infusion**

Combing Critical race theory (CRT) and Black Feminist Thought (BFT) theories within sista circle methodology is utilized because each theory serves to view research studies in a critical and uplifting approach. CRT help make sense the historical background of the racial traumas these BGW report. It is vital within sista circles to expose BGW realities they are experiencing from a long history of oppression. Using a CRT lens is also used to encourage BGW to expose and discuss ways to dismantle these systems of oppression through the healing process using their counternarratives in the sista circle group. I added BFT because CRT does not directly align with Black women. CRT is a broad lens that allows us to question, dismantle and expose acts of injustice

towards any identity that one can hold. Keeping BFT in the forefront as a researcher allows one to examine Black women as whole people and not on the stereotypes that portray them. BFT allows researchers to see Black women as whole people in their complexities, which will validate the lives, experiences, and particularities of Black women, researchers, scholars, and participants (Clemons, 2019). BFT also promotes healing and love, which is a tenet to infuse throughout the sista circle methodology because that is what these BGW need in this world that frequently sees them as the "intruder/outsider" in spaces. BGWs need to feel loved and safe by embracing healing within their experiences and collaborating in the group.

#### Implications of Using Sista Circles Counseling

The implications sista circle methodology can have for the counseling profession is the ability to implement the sista circles, a group therapy intervention for Black women who are experiencing feelings of self-doubt, microaggression, and invisibility. If a counselor implements sista circles to help Black women collectively, they will ultimately also learn about the importance of infusing culturally appropriate theories with this intervention. When working with Black women in the counseling space, using theories such as critical race theory and Black feminist thought to engage in sista circles will empower Black women in the counseling space to control how they want therapy to be conducted along with controlling treatment that is aligned with them and their experiences. The use of Black feminist thought and Critical Race Theory in counseling allows the counselor to understand how contextual factors have contributed to experiences and ways to help Black women in the counseling space reclaim and redefine themselves from the experiences. Black women knowing and understanding the shared

history between each other and how it has created false messages and discussing ways to reframe them allows for empowerment.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Sista Circle's methodology is critical to engaging in research while understanding Black women's experiences. As previous scholars mentioned, it was a form of data collection and indirectly an intervention when using this methodology in their research studies. Commonly utilized theories in this methodology include critical race theory or Black Feminist Thought Theory. Within this chapter, it is proposed to infuse Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought together when implementing this methodology to be able to work on ways to dismantle injustices within systems along with centering the Black women within the sista circles. There are more studies to explore within the counseling field by implementing the sista circle methodology to have a better understanding of the mental challenges and stressors Black women experience. According to past studies (Cokley, 2020; Lacy, 2017; Johnson, 2015), organic healing components emerged from the sista circles. Knowing healing is occurring naturally in these sista circles, a gap in research consists of more studies utilizing sista circles not only as a methodology but as a critical group intervention for Black women and analyzing the effects of using sista circles as a critical counseling intervention for Black women.

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CHAPTER 3

WE ARE HERE: UTILIZING SISTA CIRCLE METHODOLOGY TO  
UNDERSTAND RACE BASED TRUAMATIC STRESS WITH BLACK GRADUATE  
WOMEN<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Grinnage, D., To be submitted to the Journal of Counseling and Development

## ABSTRACT

The goal of this article is to provide a liberating framework for Black Graduate Women (BGW) to discuss their racial based traumatic stress and foster a healing space to process and find empowerment from these experiences. Race Based Traumatic Stress is defined as “The product of chronic stress caused by experiences of racism.” (Carter, 2007). Often, Black Graduate Women do not have the space to process racial based traumatic stress they are experiencing inside and outside of educational spaces due to

having to navigate variables such as isolation, microaggressions and sense of belonging in educational spaces (Apugo, 2020). Previous studies have shown Black women enjoy shared and sacred spaces, such as affinity groups, which have allowed Black Women to directly target psychological feelings of isolation, marginalization, a sense of belonging, and invisibility (Apugo 2020; Coker et. al 2003; Jones & Pritchett-Johnson, 2018; Walkington 2017; Johnson-Bailey 2004). Sista Circle Methodology (SCM), defined as "a qualitative research methodology and support group for examining the lived experiences of Black women" (p. 43) allows for Black Graduate Women to be part of a sacred space to process their experiences and find healing within each other. In this article sista circle methodology was utilized to gather knowledge regarding how Black women were experiencing racial stress and how are they healed or working towards healing from these experiences. Themes produced from the study included: Never getting relief, Questioning Self, Spaces Matter, Discredited/Unheard, Discovering Ourselves, Community Building is vital and Healing is Dynamic.

### **Framework of Study**

My research questions are:

- 1.) What the experiences of Black Graduate women with RBTS?
- 2.) What knowledge is generated from Black Graduate Women in Sista circles regarding healing from RBTS?

Through conducting these Sista circles with Black Graduate Women in higher educational spaces, I hoped to understand how higher educational spaces have contributed to the oppression Black Graduate Women experience when pursuing their advanced degrees. Data from this study serve as a call to action in higher educational

spaces where prevention and intervention could occur regarding addressing racial trauma. Moreover, exploring and publishing the experiences of Black Graduate Women will help increase counselor awareness of the experience of race based traumatic stress for Black Graduate Women, and help promote healing for Black Graduate Women from their racial trauma. This study will also offer methodological implications for ways *sista circles* can be utilized in research spaces to share knowledge, narratives, and solutions with negative experiences.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

It is essential to explain who I am as a researcher and its impact on this dissertation. First, I identify as a cisgender, African American female, first-generation college individual; I have endured many historical events in my higher education journey. Historical events such as killings of unarmed people of color, protests, insurrection of capital, and immigration borders regarding marginalized populations have only worsened since I first started college in 2012. With these various historical events, I have witnessed it has been challenging to complete degrees with the anxiety and stress I experience daily due to my racial identity. After speaking to students of color, I have realized we all have similar reactions and are trying to maintain composure in higher education settings while constantly hearing the racism that occurs to people daily.

I had always thought about race and how it influences how I must be in this world before attending higher educational institutions. As a counselor experiencing racial traumas and noticing racial trauma with clients, I have noticed a lack of interventions to process racial traumas effectively. I also acknowledge that race-based traumatic stress fails to be in the DSM-5 and is often combined with PTSD diagnosis, which is an inaccurate representation of race-based traumatic stress. The purpose of this dissertation

is to highlight where the counseling profession is lacking to address and highlights the need/importance of why we as counselors need to have more discussions regarding race-based traumatic stress.

I mentioned my various identities and experiences to highlight ways that I showed up in these sista circles and to acknowledge there are ways I may have influenced the group and the topics indirectly with my personal experiences and counseling training. In the procedures section I will mention “I” majority of the time instead of ‘researcher’ because as an active member in the sista circles I feel using the word “researcher” to describe what I did can distance myself from the study. To stay true to the study the goal was not to take over the groups or provide “counseling” to the sistas involved in the study. The aim was to create a collective space for Black Graduate Women to support, heal and having effective dialogue on ways to navigate their racial traumas that impacts them inside and outside of educational spaces.

## **Procedures**

### **Recruitment**

The goal of this study is to understand the experiences of Black Graduate Women (BGW). Therefore, researcher focused on recruiting Black Graduate Women (BGW) in their doctoral or master’s level program between 22-45 years of age. Furthermore, to ensure that each participant be able to share experiences to be studied, participants must identify as a Black cisgender Woman, and must have experienced a racial trauma that

impacts their social relationships, identity, and satisfaction of self. Inclusion was verified through a pre-screening interview that explored all these areas on how their racial stress and trauma impacted the women chosen for the study. Finally, inclusion criteria were that students attend the University of Georgia. Exclusion for this study including anyone outside of age range, not identifying as a Black cis gender woman, does not align with experiencing RBTS and not a graduate student of University of Georgia. In most research involving students, academic institutions are not explicitly named. I have chosen to reveal the university for this study because leaving the university anonymous reaffirms structural racism. When not naming the university, it can minimize racism's impact and induces cultures of silence within people of color (Jones, 2020).

This study used purposive sampling where selection of participants was based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria that is listed for this study. Purposive sampling was applied to be able to create a cohesive sista circle so participants would share similar experiences. I emailed professors who were head of various graduate departments (social work, psychology, education) at University of Georgia. I also messaged within University of Georgia Black Graduate Women listservs and used social media to recruit, sharing the recruitment flyer to potential members who could qualify for the study. Social Media was used by sharing recruitment flyer out to be shared to potential members who could qualify for the study. I also included my contact information on the flyers along with a link to a survey to fill out if the study is of interest to participants. Each participant was informed they would earn a \$10 Visa gift cards per group awarded after all five groups and were completed. The highest amount able to earn will be 50.00 total for this study.

During the pre-screening interview, I showed the Carters conceptual model of RBTS (2007) and explain the definition of RBTS to make sure participants aligned with the definition provided. After showing the Carters Conceptual model of RBTS (2007) I then went through the pre-screening questions to further assess some of the questions focused on what experiences did the members see as racial trauma that has created stress today, what are they looking forward to in the circles and if they ever experienced sista circles. The pre-screening interview was held by on a virtual meeting platform with the researcher. After conceptual model and pre-screening questions was performed researcher then verbally went over research consent which consisted of purpose of the study, expectations, benefits, risks and incentives. Questions asked by the researcher to the members protocol will be in the appendix C. Consents that each member was able to review and decide if they wanted to participate is in appendix A.

### **Participants**

The goal was to recruit 8 Black Graduate Women to account for attrition which is consistent with previous research employing SCM (e.g. Cokley, 2020; Lacy 2017; Dunmeyer 2018). At the conclusion of recruiting, I had recruited 7 Black Graduate Women that met criteria and had completed the pre-screening interview with researcher. At the start of the first sista circle group the amount of BGW dropped from 7 to 6 due to one member having scheduling conflicts with meeting times. Below is a table that shows the members pseudonyms, program/major and age.

**Table 1: Sistas Demographics**

Name	College	Degree Program	Age
Becky	College of Education	Ph.D. Program	25-29
Eugenia	College of Education	Ph.D. Program	30-34

Madison	College of Education	Ph.D. Program	35-40
Alice	College of Education	Ph.D. Program	45-49
Heather	School of Social Work	Masters	20-24
Diana	College of Education	Ph.D. Program	25-29
Patricia	College of Education	Ph.D. Program	35-39

## SCM PROTOCOL

SCM group protocols are difficult to pre-plan because the sistas in the circle lead the group. As the researcher, I proposed a topic and activity regarding the research questions, but all of us will lead the dialogue and direction of the group in the sista circle. The direction and topic of each upcoming group can shift due to the members providing what they want to discuss and engage in activities surrounding the research question. In the study each sista circle group was planned after the previous one occurred; I utilized journal reflections and dialogue during the sista circles to plan what the next group will discuss surrounding the research questions. This protocol of sista circles below is an infusion of a couple of studies (Lacy, 2017; Palmer, 2021; Cokley, 2020; Johnson, 2015) highlighting a non-directive approach to Sista circle methodology. I thank these beautiful sistas for publishing in an area still developing its foundation in the research world. Below is a chart to explain the topics that were discussed during each of the sista circles in this study. The flow chart is influenced by Lacy's (2017) flow chart of how she organized each group.

**Table 2: Sista Circle Protocol Outline** (Lacy, 2017)

Circle 1 Topic: Introduction	Reflection #1 Follow up Email	Circle #2 Protocol Creation
Circle 2 Topic: What is your Story?	Reflection #2 Follow up Email	Circle #3 Protocol creation

Circle 3 Topic: Action Healing	Reflection #3 Follow up email	Circle #4 Protocol Creation
Circle 4 Topic: Thriving, Healing and Closing	Reflection #4 Follow up email for reminding about scheduling individual emails and final meeting	Circle #5 Protocol Creation (which consisted of the topic of reviewing themes that I have established and checking in with the sistas regarding the themes)
Circle 5 Topic: Member Checking	Reflection #5 Follow up Email to thanks sistas and discuss incentive and next steps	Continue work on analysis of data along with sharing and uploading analysis as I go within the study.

### Data Collection

There were five sista healing circles, the first and last held virtually via Zoom. Circles two through four were held inside of member's home. Sistas had the option to do the sista circles at the public library, but after the first meeting, sistas expressed not feeling comfortable, and some even said they did not feel safe about discussing their racial stress in a public setting. After voting, all members agreed to rotate the groups at members' homes. Sista circles 1-4 were considered content circles, while the last circle served as member checking.

As the primary researcher, I chose to follow Lacy's (2017) protocol, which allowed the conversations to flow organically and create the themes for the next circle after discussion and reviewing the reflection journals from the sistas. The only circle with a theme and protocol already set in place was sista circle group one, which focused on introductions. I opened space for members to have a post-individual interview after the last sista circle member checking group. After the study, no members requested or needed to meet individually with me due to agreeing with preliminary themes and feeling they said what they needed to say during the circles.

Throughout each group, members of the Sista circle were given guiding prompts to write in journals regarding the sista circle group to reflect on after each group. Group members had a choice to keep an electronic copy of their journal or a physical journal. Physical journals were offered to allow space for members who may want to use more than words to reflect on the process. The electronic copies of journals were sent to the researcher and placed in a password-protected folder to allow me to access the journal upon study completion. After completion of the study all journals (electronic and physical) were destroyed. The journal entries served as data to collect during this study. I engaged in a journal entry after each group since, in SCM, the researcher is part of the circle. The journals were vital because they allowed the participants time to process/reflect intentionally, where they had time to think about how the group had impacted them. The journals allowed me to address themes not explicitly shown during the sista circle groups.

The data collection took a period of six weeks in total. In total data collection consisted of five sista circles which were recorded and used as the primary source of data. Other sources of data to develop findings and utilized for analysis consisted of artifacts made in the sista circles and reflection journals. Due to the sista circles being the primary source of data the journals served as data that further supported the themes produced for the study. At the end of all sista circles there was a total of 5 transcripts, 27 reflections and 4 artifacts collected during the study. In the next section the materials that utilized a coding and analysis process was the transcripts and reflections.

### **Data Analysis**

This study employed a four-step coding and analysis process, based on the previous work by Lacy (2017) and Cokley (2020). The four-step process is outline below:

Step 1: Primary researcher develops initial codes related to proposed research questions by reviewing all audio and transcripts. Any codes that do not relate to research questions but keeps coming through the data were placed in a separate document for future study. Example of codes left out not related to research question was influence of religious identities and being a single Black woman with higher educational degrees. Initial coding was done manually, then notes, codes, and researcher reactions were transferred to ATLAS.TI. ATLAS.TI, a qualitative research tool used for coding and analyzing data. I used ATLAS.TI as a tool to keep data organized with the codes that were transferred.

Step 2: Researcher checked initial codes for redundancy, then categorized codes into groups that shared similar topics and meanings. For example, I combined the two codes “left to fix it alone” and “isolation” as they meant similar things. Another pair that I merged as one was racial trauma is all around and awareness of systems.

Step 3: Researcher organized the new categories from step two into broader themes, connecting them back to the conceptual framework and research questions. Connecting back to the conceptual framework means to view the data and themes through the lenses/viewpoint of the BFT and CRT tenets. An example of this was grouping codes of ‘finding ourselves’, ‘redefining’, ‘we belong’ and “mislabelled” into one group that represented the overall theme of Discovering ourselves.

Step 4: After themes were created, each theme was compiled on excel with quotes/data that represented the theme.

The journals and the Sista circles were both forms of data collection and for analysis of the data both sets of data were combined to follow this four-step process. During the data analysis I chose to review and follow the four step coding process with transcripts first and then the reflection journals. The journals supported the final themes created.

Black Feminist Theory and epistemology are rooted in the dialogue (verbal, nonverbal, inflection, phrases, faces, way of being) between Black women. The presence of the "dialogic is not done in isolation but rather insists on a congregation of women who live at the intersections of gender, race, and class" (Jones, 2016, p. 104). The dialogue within the sista circles created knowledge on the lived experiences, meaning-making, connections, caring, and accountability each Sista has with each other in this collective experience. Analyzing the dialogue within the sista circles provided validity to the study. Using the dialogue as the source where knowledge is produced and valid aligns with Black Feminist perspectives because Collins (1992) encourages challenging (breaking the status quo) the hegemonic knowledge of production and validation within research.

All sistas attended the last member checking meeting and no sistas requested or needed any post individual interviews. During the member checking meeting I reviewed all the codes and the four-step process produced from the circles related to the questions. During the member checking session many of the sistas expressed fears of the themes being "too negative" "aggressive" and wanted to make sure not all themes were negative due to having rich dialogue about positive healing and change. One sista stated in the member checking session "I just want to make sure we don't come across as angry Black

women” and others during this study agreed about their fears. After explaining the positive themes that was generated the sistas expressed it was a great balance of themes and felt it represent the overall study. After member checking session there was no change in themes but as the primary researcher it made me think about ways, I can continue to protect each member in this study and be authentic in the process.

The sistas had access and could review the transcripts, initial codes, and themes to add insight or additional comments. All sista circle members had access to the themes with the quotations that supported the theme. At any time during the analysis, I encouraged sista circle members to double-check the codes and the titles of the themes. Members were also encouraged to ask questions and provide feedback whenever they had concerns or needed help understanding any steps the researcher had implemented throughout the study. The access members were given was access to audio and transcripts on a share drive to view whenever they wanted to view. I also notified members whenever data was uploaded on the share drive. In the beginning of each sista circle I explained emerging codes and themes to get members insight. All members in the study have access to all of these files and to make changes all the way up to defense of this dissertation study.

Member checking procedures were vital to align with this study and its theories utilized. Member checking is defined as sharing interview transcripts, analytical thoughts, and drafts of final reports with research participants to make sure the researcher represents them correctly. Member checking helps researchers in qualitative studies verify the trustworthiness of their data collection and analysis (Glesene, 2006). Member checking in this study allowed for each sista to feel heard, seen, and visible within the

research. When considering the importance of member checking and critical race theory and the tenet of counternarratives, each sista provided their counternarrative that is often silenced, forgotten, or ignored in various spaces. From a Black Feminist Thought perspective, Collins (1990) states, "Black women who have lived through the experiences...are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought such experiences" (p.276). This quote from Collins emphasizes that instead of Black women carrying and repressing their painful experiences, Black women can share their narratives and be the experts of their experiences. Opening and inviting the sistas to check any themes I have identified from the data allows them to be the experts and control how they want to be defined when conducting and analyzing the data.

### **Findings**

The research question guiding this study are: What knowledge is generated in Sista Circles regarding BGW experiencing RBTS and what knowledge is created in Sista Circles regarding healing from RBTS? Seven themes emerged from the data collected including: Never Getting Relief, Questioning Self, Spaces Matter and Impacts Racial Stress, Discredited/Unheard, Discovering Ourselves/Finding Ourselves, Community Building is Vital and Healing is Dynamic.

**Table 3: Themes and Subthemes**

Themes Answering Research Question	Themes	Subthemes

(1) What knowledge is generated in Sista Circles regarding BGW experiencing RBTS?	Discredited	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unheard</li> <li>• Not acknowledge in roles/accomplishments Never enough</li> <li>• Unable to advocate for self</li> </ul>
	Spaces Matter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outsider</li> <li>• Pushed out of spaces</li> <li>• Questioned in spaces</li> </ul>
	Questioning Self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-doubt</li> <li>• Questioning self</li> <li>• Questioned by others about identity</li> </ul>
	Never getting relief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isolation</li> <li>• Scared to trust</li> <li>• Left to fix it alone</li> <li>• Trauma responses</li> </ul>
(2)What knowledge is created in Sista Circles regarding healing from RBTS?	Community Building is Vital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validation</li> <li>• No judgement,</li> <li>• Advocating for other people of color</li> <li>• Holding each other up</li> </ul>
	Discovering Ourselves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finding ourselves</li> <li>• Re-defining</li> <li>• We belong</li> <li>• Mislabeled</li> <li>• Not repeating status quo</li> <li>• Not tolerating trauma</li> </ul>
	Healing is Dynamic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Release</li> <li>• Self-Love</li> <li>• Allyship</li> <li>• Grace</li> <li>• Expressive arts healing</li> <li>• Self-care</li> <li>• Healing is ongoing and continuous</li> </ul>

### Never Getting Relief

This theme describes never having the opportunity to relax and be comfortable with racial identity because of all the constant oppression faced by BGW. Some sistas described this feeling as constantly feeling on edge as a Black woman. Never getting relief also refers to never feeling like the coping that is utilized is enough to cover the amount of racial stress that occurs with being a Black woman. As Eugenia succinctly put it, ““Doing hard things, I feel like as black people we always doing hard things.” (Sister Circle 2 Transcript)

Sistas throughout the circles discussed having their guard up due to the amount of adverse racial events they experienced in their lives. Sistas expressed symptoms of racial stress that included hypervigilance, tired, fed up, and even avoidant behavior. In one member's reflection journal, they stated after hearing the narratives from the second sista circle: "I feel emotional as I write about this because I hate how much bullshit we (the group members and Black women in general) have had to endure, from childhood through the present day."

Sistas expressed that these symptoms have prevented them from fully connecting to their professors, especially in their graduate school programs. Members expressed that they had their guard up to even professors who seemed to be allies because they had been disappointed so much in their lives. In Sista Circle 2, when discussing this discussion, Patricia discussed a professor she wants to connect with, but due to past experiences, she can only partially connect. Below is the dialogue Patricia discussed about her relationship with her professor with the sistas in the circle:

**Patricia:** I really want to like you (you refers to professor), but I'm scared to like you. I'm scared to like, give you entree into that part of me because if you betray

me, and I've given you and it takes a long time, I will be like I'm done. I'm gonna be devastated because then I'm going to be like see I knew I shouldn't have trusted this white person. So it makes me like... I won't even give them sometimes an opportunity. Like I gave that attitude to Dr. Blank. I hated him for a whole year. He was like, come on now Patricia talk to me.”

**Diana :**Wow

**Becky :**I was like he's (Dr. BLANK) nice. Patricia was like, he's still a white man.

**Patricia :**still a white man. He's still a white man and because of that I was scared. But that is the way it is and he has done nothing to me like, but I'm scared to like allow.

**Heather :**You sound hypervillgant

**Patricia :**Yes I'm HYPERVILLAGANTE.

**Becky :**You know I feel that way about Dr. BLANK and I don't care. I'm waiting

**Patricia :**And should.

**Diana:** That happens, because you don't want to be disappointed.

**Patricia:** No, for sure. I've been disappointed a lot.

**Diana: Yeah,** burned out. So that makes sense why we're avoidant, hyper vigilant, all those different things.

(Sista Circle Transcript 2)

Not only were sistas disclosing symptoms, but throughout the circles, many of them mentioned times when they were left to resolve/fix the racial issues on their own, especially in school settings. In sista circle 2 Becky described a time where she was mislabeled and purposely left out of a group assignment. During this event, Becky

reported that the professor noticed the students behaving this way toward Becky. Instead of advocating directly for Becky, the professor asked Becky, “What would you like me to do?”. Becky and other sistas expressed in moments such as these, why is it always left up to the person who is receiving the racial trauma or microaggressions to fix the issues? Another sista Eugenia shared a similar story when she had a white student in her DEI class call her out as being “aggressive” and when trying to effectively address the issue administration just let the situation go. No one checked up on Eugenia to see how she felt about this mislabel and fabrications made upon her.

### **Questioning Self**

This theme is defined as not knowing how to handle adverse racial events that lead to stress, questioning who they are, and feeling boxed in by labels placed on them. Sistas had discussed fighting between the stereotypes and who they indeed were, which had caused confusion at various times in their lives on how to handle racial trauma and stress. Sistas expressed that questioning their selves led to thoughts and feelings where they felt crazy or overthought situations when experiencing racial trauma. Eugenia stated: “I feel like in a lot of these situations like racial trauma, or aggressions that I always kind of second guess how I handle them” (Sister Circle Transcript 1). Due to this constant questioning self and doubting self, members of the sista circles expressed they joined this study to be able to identify solutions that handle experiences that involve racial trauma. Patricia stated in sista circle one when thinking about racial trauma she second guessed herself: “when you were talking about racialized trauma, sometimes you get into your head that maybe these things didn't happen, because you're like, nobody's that crazy. They're not that crazy, but they ARE.”- (Patricia, Sista Circle 1, Transcript).

Even though the pre-screening interviews were not recorded, more than half of the members identified feeling “stuck” and “stagnant “with solutions due to the chronic feelings of doubting self. This ultimately can contribute to stress because what sistas were indirectly describing is the ways questioning self has caused them to repress negative racial traumatic events, which further induced their levels of stress. When sharing our various narratives that included racial stress, sistas expressed that an immense amount of mislabeling in work settings which ultimately made it difficult to advocate when injustices were being done in oppressive environment.

### **Spaces Matter & Impacts Racial Stress**

This theme recognizes that the spaces (environment) that one is placed in heavily influences the perceptions, reactions and behaviors that occur from racial stress. Negative environments further induce feelings of isolation and questioning sense of belonging. For participants, the spaces in which they worked and learned in influenced the amount of racial stress experienced. All sistas have had positive examples of spaces that helped uplift and empower them through racial stress. This discussion of spaces was remarked on by sista Patricia in sista circle 2 when she described how she finally felt a sense of belonging and recognized the importance of spaces when she attended an HBCU institution. Within the statement below, Patricia expresses how a positive space at her HBCU experience made her never want to return to spaces where she felt pushed out.

**Patricia:** “I went to HBCU university, I was like, I am never dealing with white folk, again. It was like the mecca for me, I was so happy there was every kind of Black girl that you could Black with. Comic book, Black girl. Black girl, there's a strong Black girl. I mean, there was the Bible study Black girls, every Black girl

was there. It was like Mecca and when it was time to graduate, I was like, I'm not going back to that. So I went to only Black schools, mostly Black teachers also taught in BLANK County, because that's the only place I wanted to be was with Black children. Then I got to UGA and I HAD FORGOTTEN. (3.0 secs) I had built myself up so much with all these Black women and these students and kids.” (Sista Circle 2, Transcript).

Many members, identified safe spaces as environments where they can be authentic, not code-switching, and not feel they were the center of attention. Sistas also expressed that when in these spaces, their level of racial stress symptoms was the lowest because they no longer had to feel pushed out. In sista circle three when talking about spaces with other Black women Becky stated:

“So I like being in these spaces where it's like I don't have to be anything but me. I don't have to put on any clothes. I could snatch my wig off at any time. You know, I don't have to be like perfect I can just be which I think has a lot to do with the trauma when you have to code switch so [many times “

**Diana:** “Oh my god yeah]”

**Becky:** “with a group of people so for me it's having this village will be helpful for me.”

In a reflection journal one of the sista expressed that they would recommend sista healing circles just because of the spaces alone are powerful quote below:

“I would absolutely, 100% recommend sister healing circles to other Black women. They are spaces dedicated to emotional, social, racial, and mental safety. Women can be themselves and they don't have to be overtly spiritual” (Sista Circle, Reflection).

Even though another theme is listed regarding healing, all sistas agreed that just having the sistas circles was a healing moment because they could be themselves.

Within the dialogue of spaces, all sistas also experienced being in spaces where they felt pushed out and not wanted, which contributed significantly to their racial stress. Sistas expressed that no matter where they go, especially in dominant (white) spaces, they are centered, which causes feelings of alienation and isolation. Sistas discussed how they sometimes feel the need to adapt to their environment to avoid being shut out/pushed out of spaces. Members expressed negative racial experiences in specific spaces, creating feelings of avoidance to avoid being uncomfortable.

When speaking on spaces, sistas had a dialogue about obtaining higher level degrees, and with each degree, the more racial stress they felt because they felt as they went higher in education (Masters, specialist, Ph.D.), the more they experienced adverse events that caused them to feel pushed out, alienated, and negatively centered. Some members described this experience as "hazing" when obtaining higher-level degrees and entering spaces where people have above bachelor's degrees. Example of dialogue that surrounded this hazing discussed in sista circle 3 is below:

**Patricia:** Yes, because I didn't feel this way in my master's program. I didn't feel like this when I got a specialist. I didn't feel like any of that it's something REAL special it's almost like the gate got harder to get through. They like we will give you a Masters. We will even let you get this cute little specialist but you're trying to be part of the 2%.

**Eugenia:** Oh, we gotta take you out

**Patricia:** Oh we gotta figure out a way to really haze you out

**Diana:** Mhmm

This dialogue above also represents the many moments in the sista circles where multiple members would either head nod or say “mhhh”, “yeah” which symbolized not only the shared experiences but the collective approach we all had organically when it came to validating other sistas in the group when they shared their stories.

### **Discredited/Unheard**

This theme illustrates that voices are silenced where it is hard to speak up, advocate and be acknowledged within various roles that Sistas held. Not being able to speak up further induced feelings of racial stress. This theme further defines the constant battle with fighting the status quo of dominant narratives, beliefs, and ideologies. Many of the negative racial experiences sistas discussed started in elementary school. Sistas discussed the pure exhaustion that is felt from never being enough or acknowledged for the roles they are placed in, whether it is in school, work, or outside settings. Below are some examples surrounding this theme.

Sistas Alice and Becky both discussed in sister circle two how they were treated in elementary school due to their race. Alice discussed as early as kindergarten getting into an altercation with a white student and being automatically suspended and not allowed to express her side of the story. Alice expressed she always knew she was Black but didn't understand until that moment how often her voice would be silence as a Black girl. Alice expressed at an early age she received the message from her mother stating “well, you're black and she is white and they're gonna take the white girls word” (Sista Circle 2 Transcript).

Becky discussed in sister circle two right after Alice's story about a time she ran for class president in her elementary school at a predominantly white school and how the

school had stopped her in the middle of campaigning due to realizing she was going to win. The following day Becky lost the campaign to another female and expressed the winner expressed she didn't know how she won for the role. At the time Becky questioned "how can we exist, when we aren't even acknowledged for our accomplishments".

Patricia and Diana both had similar experiences regarding school experiences in high school. Both members discussed being the "only" in honors and AP classes and how they were not acknowledged when in these classes. When Patricia and Diana did have accomplishments in high school they were often questioned or challenged by their accomplishments. Diana reported a high school experience where she was not acknowledged quote is below.

**Diana:** "I still think about to this day in my AP Lit class, I got like the highest test score on one of our tests. Everybody was like, "what did you do? Were you looking at your phone to find the answers? How did you get these answers? How did you score so high?" (Sister Circle 2, transcript)

Patricia and Becky both discussed in the circles about not being acknowledged in their roles as doctoral students working with teacher candidates. Both of these sistas described experiences where they questioned and challenged in ways their other colleagues who were not Black. Patricia and Becky reported they were not acknowledged or even respected in their roles as instructors working with teacher candidates. Patricia expressed the only time she was acknowledged within her role was when she had another white teaching assistant who would call out the disrespect. Example from this dialogue Patricia expressed is below from Sista circle two:

**Patricia:** I was the professor of record for a course, and they were so mean to me. Like they rolled their eyes when I talked. I had a white witness (referring to a white teaching assistant) in that room because another sister wouldn't have been good, they wouldn't have cooperated my story. They would have been like " oh, no, they're in cahoots". If they had put Becky and I in there they would have been like, "Oh, they're both mean aggressive women".

Madison in sister circle 2 had discussed how her voice and roles is silenced in the work setting. Madison discussed in the circle a conflict she had a with a coworker who was harassing her and not given any penalties for their behavior at work. When Madison addressed her concerns with administration, she was told to take this coworker to lunch to resolve the issues. Madison chose to email administration about her constant harassment and instead of acknowledging her distress she was told she was being unprofessional.

All sistas discussed how this constant lack of acknowledgment, invalidation and silencing when experiencing racial trauma and stress causes us as Black Women to shrink. We also felt how do we manage when these variables are at play.

Below is another example during Sister circle 3 of discussing our stress with not being acknowledged dialogue below:

**Becky:** I really have seen it so many times where Black women will start to like shrink, or like stop saying or stop being themselves because you get so much feedback about you, not your work.

**All members:** “YEAH (heard from multiple members)”

**Madison:** It's never about the work

**Patricia:** Not my work. It's about me and how I'm presenting to you? Well, just because

your insecurities are bumping up against my competence doesn't mean that I will have to fold in on myself.

The quote above is an example of the conversations that were discussed in the sista circles where members resonated with each other and felt empathetic towards the various narratives coming from the sistas.

### **Community Building is Vital:**

Throughout the circles sistas discussed how they felt often heard, validated, and even understand within their communities and described how impactful it was in the past and during the sista circles with members. Sista expressed when around other Black women being they felt Black Women would show up for them, hold them accountable while also fostering healing.

Majority of the Sista's disclosed during the sister healing circles that being with each other during the circles allow for normalization to occur where they felt no longer alone with how they were processing trauma and the stress that comes with racial trauma. Members expressed feeling "relieved" by hearing others stories and discussing ways to identify solutions to racial stress.

Members were able to advocate for other people of color within their work and school settings due to having a strong community. Members expressed being able to advocate for people of color in their work and school settings was a way to hold each other up during the racial stress and trauma people of color experienced. At the conclusion of the sista circles the sistas expressed feeling mentorship within the circle and strengthening their overall support system which has overall helps with the racial based stress/trauma. All sistas identify as having a strong support system whether that's

Black Women or even white allies is key to healing and processing their racial stress.

Below are some quotes that support this theme.

**Diana:** “there is no judgment in here. I want you to know, like, I want you to be yourself.

Like, yes, we're students, but we're more than students. We're always students. So please just be yourself in this space anytime” (Sister circle 1 Transcript)

**Becky:** I was going to say that it took me going through stuff in my first semester to realize that go embarking on this journey requires a village. (Sister Circle 1 Transcript)

**Patricia:** I love Sister Circles, because it's like, you get a whole hour of looking across the room as somebody who's like, mmmm me, too. I also like the confirmation. (Sister 1 Transcript)

In Sista Circle two Patricia was being labeled and experiencing racial stress while being a TA expressed the importance of having people there to check up on you as you experience racial stress. Patricia quote below when she had a friend check up on her:

**Patricia :** They talked about me in the hallway one of the other sisters had to call me she was like, "girl is you alright?". I was like, I guess so today's you know, Monday, I hate them all. So it's a regular day. She was like, "these hoes was on the elevator talking shit about you and I had to keep my mouth closed". She was like, "they were talking about you. They were saying all types of this. Like are you okay"? She's like, "because I know and felt how mean they were".

When explaining this narrative Becky who also knows Patricia outside of the circle further validated and help reframe the narrative painted about Patricia by stating

**Becky:** I’m just baffled because this is nothing of your personality.

During Sista Circle 3 when discussing ways to heal and cope from racial stress member highlighted the importance of community not only inside of sister circles but also on the outside of these sista circles.

**Becky:** “I think for me again, like villages, positive villages, helped me be able to process any type of trauma whether it's racial, family, personal business, so I think you know, being able to come together like this and like laugh.” (Sista Circle 3, Transcript)

Within sista circle 3 Madison was discussing how she had second guessed herself and labeled in the work setting. Member Alice was able to validate her in the moment during the circle by uplifting the mislabels, she stated and helped Madison reframe in the moment. Alice had encouraged Madison to look at the things she had questioned about herself as a way to see she has a gift and her voice and personality is needed in various settings.

During the last sista circle Patricia created an art piece to represent Black Women are out there supporting other Black women within these predominantly white spaces she titled her artwork “We are HERE”. Patricia and other members both said once you find other supportive Black women it changes your outlook on how you process your trauma. Below is her artwork:

**Figure 2: We are Here**



Alice and Diana both reflected in their artwork the importance of Black Women within their community and painted very similar paintings that represent a village/community system to function and be uplifted through stress.



Figure 3: Centering & Supported

Alice Painting. Alice represents the red dot in the middle and the circles represents each of the members in the sista circle to represent her feeling supported and centered.



**Figure 4: Pouring In**

Diana painted to present herself and the dots present how each sista has poured into her to continue to build and lift her up through any moments of oppression.

### **Discovering Ourselves/Finding Ourselves**

Throughout the sista circles, members discussed the constant mislabeling and stereotypes placed upon them. In the first two circles when, members discussed how racial trauma had created a level of stress where they were questioning who they were and often felt that they had to “fit” into one label versus the ones they wanted to be known for in spaces. Within school, work, and outside settings, sistas had discussed how people labeled them as “sassy, aggressive, unkind, unorganized, and even too calm.” Heather discussed that during her time at an internship with other students of color, she

and other Black teenagers were called out and labeled as aggressive and loud, along with being blamed for various situations during this internship.

Eugenia expressed when she was speaking up about a negative experience in her DEI class a student went to the Dean to express, she was being aggressive and was refrained from speaking with this student for the rest of the semester. Members expressed throughout the circle they felt if they didn't fit in a certain Eurocentric standard they were mislabeled. In sister circle three member Patricia stated:

**Patricia** :“Yes, you have a strong personality. So if I can't make you a sapphire, you are strong personality. I can't make you a mammy then you are strong personality. I can't make you a mad black woman. I can't see you as this so we just got to throw it away. (Changing voice/inflection) You have a strong personality. “

**Eugenia** : “Then you have a strong personality”

As we moved into the last two sista circles members expressed wanting to fight the status quo, reclaiming who we are and no longer tolerating the labels placed upon us. In the last two circles members highlighted to other members in the circles how we need to redefine and own who we truly are and not what has been placed upon us. During our expressive arts check in for sister circle 3 that further correlated with this theme Becky stated:

**Becky**: “Appreciating like all the features because like who I am, I was made from love. So all of those features, you know, whether in the in society, whether people seen that as beautiful or not, I know that I was made from love, so I feel

they're beautiful. I love a red lip its something about being a red lip and a black girl .” (Sister Circle 3, Transcript)

Another member Patricia during this check in when discussing ways to get to wellness and redefining ourselves stated:

**Patricia** :“Like, what is something that's gonna promote our wellness and keep us keep moving into healing space, because we can't change who we are and I don't want to change who I am. I like being Black and being a woman and all those different things.” (Sister Circle 3, Transcript)

In the end of Sista Circle 3 Madison brought up how can we reclaim and redefining ourselves in an empowering way. Madison asked members to think about ways we can uplift our Blackness without comparing it to white or other racially differently individuals. All members expressed goals of wanting to refrain from discussing their blackness to anti-white to avoid repeating the status quo (narrative) that plays out already in America because they realized this will not lead or help their healing journey from racial stress. We continued this conversation of redefining in sista circle 4 group by discussing our thoughts about moving through the Black Identity Model and the healing that can occur when reaching a level of knowing who we are as Black Women.

### **Healing Is Dynamic**

Healing is ongoing and continuous meaning healing must be adaptative to the various racial experiences that arise with racial stress. Not only is healing ongoing but within healing it's important to provide grace to understanding healing does not have a mastery one must continue to work towards healing when dealing with racial stress.

Healing is ongoing and continuous was a central theme all sistas had agreed on when discussing how to move forward towards healing from racial trauma and stress. Sista had conversations surrounding healing and needing to be intentional and active. We had a dialogue about what would sustain us when engaging in healing. Sistas in sister circle 1, expressed wanting to not only find a community of women to support but to find practical solutions to healing that would decrease their symptoms of the racial stress they were experiencing.

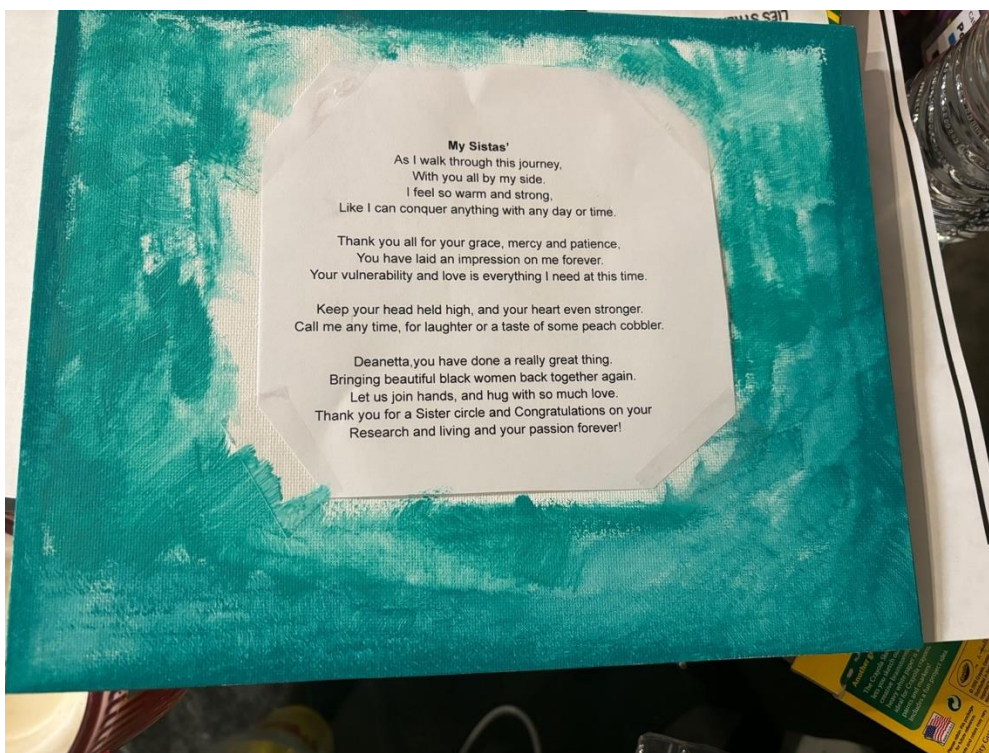
There is no mastery to healing because, as Black women, we know that negative racial events can still occur. As Black Women, we will always need to work on healing and changing how we heal when needed.

Not only did we talk about healing as an ongoing component, but we also discussed within healing, we need to give ourselves grace and self-love. Eugenia discussed how, after the 4 sista circles that were conducted, she had chosen to leave a job where she was often disregarded as a Black Woman. Eugenia expressed the act of self-love in this quote below when discussing this situation:

**Eugenia:** “My office was more worried about the image of the college in our office, not my well-being. I said, people got only got two times to make me cry and on the third time, I'm out the door. So I was like, you know, I ain't got no job lined up for real for real, but my happiness is better than this. So, I think that's what this healing sister circle has meant for me to just, you know, be happy. Choose you.” (Sister Circle 4 Transcript)

When discussing healing we also discussed the need to realize that healing takes time, and it will not happen overnight. Giving ourselves graces allows us to engage in the act of self-love and pushes us forward to continue to strive towards healing.

In the circles, sistas discussed how healing does not have to look like “one thing” to be considered healing. Members reflected in journals that the conversations in the sista circles allowed them to think about various ways to heal. Examples of ways to engage in healing of self-love and self-care sistas discussed engaging in yoga, painting, music, therapy, journaling, and finding things that make them happy to stay focused on when experiencing racial stress and trauma. In Sista Circle 4, we engaged in some examples as members created collages, poems, paintings, and even a music playlist to represent ways to heal and process their experiences. Becky poem is below which encapsulates how healing the sista circle was for her in such a short process.



**Figure 5: Sistas Poem**

One of the sistas even expressed in their reflection that healing took place in just the circle by stating: “I surely wouldn’t want to overlook the space created by our location and other activities.... the food, the music, being in someone’s home, and talking and

sharing about life before and after the research sessions have been a blessing.” (Sista Circle, Reflection)



**Figure 7: Gathering**



**Figure 8: Food**

Talking about healing also made some of the sistas within the circle more open to attending ongoing support or counseling groups to address racial trauma and stress.

Patricia expressed when discussing how therapy can be helpful with healing by highlighting things that might not be recognized as a Black woman.

Patricia in sister circle 3 stated:

“I’m an advocate for therapy. So you know, some of that stuff is like, you grow up in that and it’s so traumatizing you don’t even realize it until you got to react to something and you’re like, what the, where the hell did that come from (Sista Circle 3 Transcript).

We also discussed the importance of allyship within the healing component. We as sistas understand having allies from outside of our race allows for us to move from a space of hurt to a space of knowing there is people out there not belonging to our race that want to uplift, empower and walking with us on our healing journey.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to use Sista Circle Methodology to explore what knowledge is generated from Black Graduate Women regarding their Race-based traumatic stress while exploring what information can be generated regarding healing from RBTS. Integrating Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist thought as my theoretical lenses I was able to gather individual and shared experiences during the sista circles. This study aimed to understand how Black Graduate Women interpret their experiences and how they are resisting or attempting to resist the oppressive experiences they are dealing with while remaining in their various roles. Another aim was to share narratives and take a collaborative, participatory approach where sistas could lean on each other for guidance, validation, and mentorship to process the shared narratives. In the follow sections I will address how my results connected back to literature regarding

Black Graduate women and how the results connected back to my theoretical frameworks and the implications the findings provided.

### **Connecting Back to Literature**

Findings from the study correlated with a couple of literature cited throughout this dissertation. Black Graduate women in the study reported feelings of being invisible and discredited, which correlated with the literature on invisibility syndrome (Lawson, 2019). Invisibility syndrome is where a person of color feels their talents, character, or abilities are not valued due to racial prejudice (Franklin, 2004). Sistas from this study discussed the theme of being discredited and how they felt their voice did not matter in various experiences, along with not being acknowledged for their roles or specialties within a higher education setting.

Findings also correlated with the literature that has already been published in Mellor's study (2004) regarding psychological reactions to trauma in higher education settings and within the theme of never getting relief sistas expressed feeling avoidant and repressing their experiences throughout their lives due to feeling tired of fighting through their experiences. Some sistas expressed that when they did speak up, it was labeled as aggression, which in the Mellor study reports that Black individuals' response to racial trauma can appear to other non-black individuals as aggression and agitation.

Connecting the findings to research regarding Black graduate women within this study, the sistas expressed they felt unsupported by faculty/administration, lacked mentorship within higher education, and lacked respect from professors. The themes produced from the study connected back to the Johnson-Bailey study (2004), which

indicated similar factors as components that influenced Black graduate women's success in graduate school.

In this study, the sistas expressed they had feelings of isolation, hypervigilance, and feeling tired of the constant racial stress they were experiencing, which correlated with other scholarly works on how Black Women experience RBTS (Bizell, 2023; Carter, 2007 & Causey, 2022). Black graduate women from this study reported experiences centering around isolation, discredited, and tokenization, which correlated with Bailey's study (2004). Although the narratives and feelings that came with their racial trauma and stress correlated with previously published literature, there were a few variables that have not been discussed either at all or often in the literature mentioned. While it is not a shock that symptoms matched what has been reported from RBTS, something prevalent in this study that was missing from previous literature was the discussion of how to interpret and heal from RBTS.

Within the Sista Circles, each sista in the circle discussed ways to not stay stuck in their trauma and stress. Members understood that to keep moving forward, the importance of community is vital to continue to process experiences. Community building was identified as a protective factor for sistas as they discussed the various negative feelings of isolation and belonging, and outsiders felt their community gave them strength and guidance when nothing else did in their lives. Sista expressed throughout their lives how communities had allowed them to reframe their experiences and look for practical solutions when battling racial stress. Having a strong sense of community was the catalyst for healing being ongoing with handling their racial stress which connected

back to Apugo study (2020) on the importance of having sacred spaces with other Black women reduce negative feelings of isolation and increase sense of belonging.

Members discussed healing from RBTS as going beyond traditional talk therapy. Sistas discussed the power of being expressive through art and the importance of spaces by having sista circles inside members' homes, which is healing. We also understood the value of being welcomed in members' homes and the collective effort of making and sharing food as we work through our narratives and identify ways to heal, which is also healing within itself. Using food and cooking together allowed sistas to share stories about their families as they discussed family recipes, various family members, and childhood memories regarding race. These conversations helped to understand the foundations each sista was coming from when conducting the circles.

### **Connecting Findings to Theoretical Frameworks**

Having the circles gather at another sista home allowed them to come into the space as their authentic self where they did not have to feel "boxed in" to fit a status quo that CRT discusses can be a dominant lens. In discovering/finding ourselves theme, sistas engaged and connected back to the Black Feminist thought tenets of self-definition and controlling images. Being in sistas' homes allowed them to focus on ways they wanted to self-defined within the space. Sistas during the circles had conversations about how we were labeled and where we wanted to reframe and relabel ourselves with our definitions. Also, the ability to come into each sista home feeling relief that we did not have to put on this false image/interpretation of what we must be to succeed or fit into our spaces.

When sistas in the circle discussed questioning their selves regarding their feelings and thoughts from their negative racial experiences, other sistas in the circles

validated them at the moment. Not only did validation occur, but the encouragement from other sistas to continue to tell our counter stories, a tenet within critical race theory. Sistat encouraged others to continue to share experiences to help reduce feelings of isolation and to find community with other Black women who need mentorship and guidance.

Within our healing discussions and the theme of healing being ongoing and continuous, we made sure not to come in with a color-blind approach, which is a tenet of critical race theory. To avoid a color-blind approach to healing, we discussed realistic ways to facilitate healing from our racial stress, and that is how we, as a circle, discussed that healing must be ongoing to handle the various challenges that would still arise in a white-dominated society. We discussed practical ways we can balance how we live in these racist systems and find balance toward liberation.

These various ways we discussed healing can be beneficial for people of color who might not be ready to attend therapy or might want to investigate other interventions to process their racial stress and trauma. As the researcher, I was shocked to see the power of being inside members' homes and using food to create such rich dialogue. We were all immersed in the research, and our circles ran past the 1.5 hours due to enjoying being in each other's space, talking, and healing together. As the leading researcher, I was also impressed with how willing each sista engaged in expressive arts and a discussion of looking into alternative methods to process and get through their healing. Within the circles we cohesively moved from discussing our negative experiences to discuss solutions and ways to engage in self love.

## **Implications**

In the follow sections of implications, I will outline the implications this study has on the ways to advocate for Black Graduate Women, implications for the counseling profession, counseling education and research in general when engaging in sista circle methodology.

### **Levels of Advocacy for Black Graduate Women**

Within this section, I chose to break down the various levels that we can advocate for Black graduate women based on the findings reported from the study. Advocacy is essential because it serves as a tool for change by alerting various systems to address and rectify injustices. Advocacy allows for oppressive systems to be challenged. In this section, I use the word non-Black counselors/individuals to discuss counselors/individuals outside of the Black race to express that it is more than just white counselors who must advocate for Black graduate women. To truly address the issue, we need white, Black, Latino, Asian, and many other racial groups to understand the importance of advocating for Black graduate women. I will address ways to directly advocate for Black graduate women on micro, meso-level, and macro levels.

#### **Micro-level**

On a micro level, there are ways to advocate for Black graduate women in the case of non-Black counselors. As a non-Black counselor, preparing for these clients coming into session and adequately supporting them requires educating on the current literature regarding Black graduate women and their experiences, along with validating their stories as valid. During the therapy experience, counselors should be using a trauma-focused lens and avoiding pathologizing the symptoms that Black graduate

women report. If working in higher educational settings as a non-counselor and non-Black individual to support the students that are Black graduate women, the same actions of reading literature (seeking knowledge), validation, and even actively seeking external resources that you can refer Black graduate women to feel supported.

### **Meso-Level**

As a counselor, the way to target the meso level is to find ways to create and promote workshops that discuss Black Graduate women and their mental health and ways to support them in spreading knowledge to other counselors. As a counselor, if you notice you are working with many Black graduate women clients and you have colleagues with similar populations, create a consultation group on ways to address the experiences Black graduate women report and have dialogue and accountability with other counselors to address issues presented in the session intentionally.

If someone is working within a higher education setting and is working within administration or director of a counseling center or department, advocating for Black graduate women is to create a passion for the need for more educational training on how faculty and staff can support these women. Team up with colleagues within the department and work on an advocacy action plan/proposal. If someone is a Black or non-Black faculty member, promote ways to increase mentorship for Black graduate women by creating clubs or mixers for Black graduate women to feel supported. Invite Black women guest speakers to serve as role models for Black graduate women and find external mentorship within their field.

**Macro-level laws**

Macro-level refers to ways to implement change in policies and laws on a larger scale. Counselors (Black or Non-Black) can advocate on this level by joining your state licensing organizations, addressing the issue to bring it to other counselors' attention, and developing an advocacy plan on a state level. Apply for conferences within the counseling field and present the gaps in the counseling profession by supporting not only Black women but also people of color experiencing race-based traumatic stress. For individuals working in higher education institutions, whether counselors or non-counselors, think about seeking out grants and fellowships that will allow them to engage in research that continues to add and provide solutions for Black graduate women experiencing racial trauma and stress. As stated in previous literature, there is still information missing regarding how Black graduate women can handle their racial stress and trauma in positive ways. Even if doing the actual research is not directly aligned with a person, they could at least encourage other colleagues who do engage in race-based research to the need for studying Black graduate women by sharing previous studies and the literature gaps. Also, seek out and connect with community members who engage in social justice and advocacy to continue to consult and provide support to implement future system changes.

**Implications for Counseling Profession**

In the counseling profession, there is still much more knowledge needed about how people of color experience Race-based traumatic stress. Even though Race-Based Traumatic Stress is not a diagnosis, some assessments can identify if a client is experiencing racial stress. Results from this study can inform non-black counselors

understanding that Race-Based Traumatic Stress in Black Women can be induced by not being acknowledged in roles and being silenced when wanting to speak up. Results also show that the symptoms of racial stress in Black Women can also be repressed by Black women not opening up about their experiences and just pushing through them because they do not want to cause a rupture in their various environments, such as higher educational settings. Knowing this information from this study will help counselors understand why Black women might be resistant to expressing how the stress impacts them in a counseling setting.

This study will provide insight into Black graduate women needing social support (communities, allyships) to help foster and encourage them to heal and process various experiences that have caused racial stress. The results from this study will not only inform the counseling profession how Black Women are experiencing, processing, and interpreting their trauma, but it can also inform mental health professionals about ways Black Women want to heal from their racial stress and trauma.

The results from the study can inform counselors on the use of Sista Circles as a group counseling approach they can refer or even facilitate if they are a woman of color for Black Women experiencing racial stress. Results from this study can help counselors understand the importance of using Afrocentric, Critical, and non-Eurocentric interventions and theories within the counseling space. Since sista circles are critical and grounded in non-Eurocentric foundations, sistas expressed that they felt comfortable talking about their narratives because the process did not feel extractive or like a formal interview process. Sistias expressed that they were able to let down their guard and open up more due to being able to speak up and be heard, which was not the norm for their

lives as students. The use of Afrocentric, critical, or non-Eurocentric approaches will allow Black clients to have a stronger rapport with clinicians due to the ability to connect to a lens that respects, empowers, and gives them the power back to how they want to narrate and process their racial trauma.

Lastly, results from this study also spread awareness to counselors of the impact systems have on minority clients by understanding how stress is cultivated in America for these clients that may come into their office. Having an awareness of how systems within America have influenced the mental health of clients of color will allow them to have more empathy and understanding of why some clients become “stuck” with their racial trauma and stress in therapy.

### **Implications of Counselor Education and Pedagogy**

Implications from this study will allow counselor educators to reexamine how counseling interventions are taught and to increase education to students about ways to expand beyond the typical textbook interventions counseling students read about for processing trauma. Results will also help counselor educators who are teaching trauma material to understand the importance of giving Race-Based Traumatic Stress its separate path versus grouping it with post-traumatic stress disorder. Reading the experiences and the narratives from this study that center around ongoing stress that is uncontrollable will help counselors understand the differences where counselor educators can shift to promoting race-based traumatic stress as a trauma-based counseling course separately.

As a counselor educator, I believe this study informs educators on the various variables (unheard, discredited, silenced, forgotten) Black women experience when entering graduate programs and the need for effective and aligned mentorship for these

Black women to succeed in higher education. As counseling programs become more diverse with Black women, this study will help counselor educators understand how their unchecked biases and assumptions create the feeling for Black women to feel pushed out and invisible in these spaces. To make these spaces more inclusive and safer for Black graduate women, especially Black women entering counseling programs, counselor educators can use this study to inform institutions they are a part of as a call to action to make faculty training workshops to educate, train, and hold accountable faculty that has Black women and even other racially diverse individuals within a program.

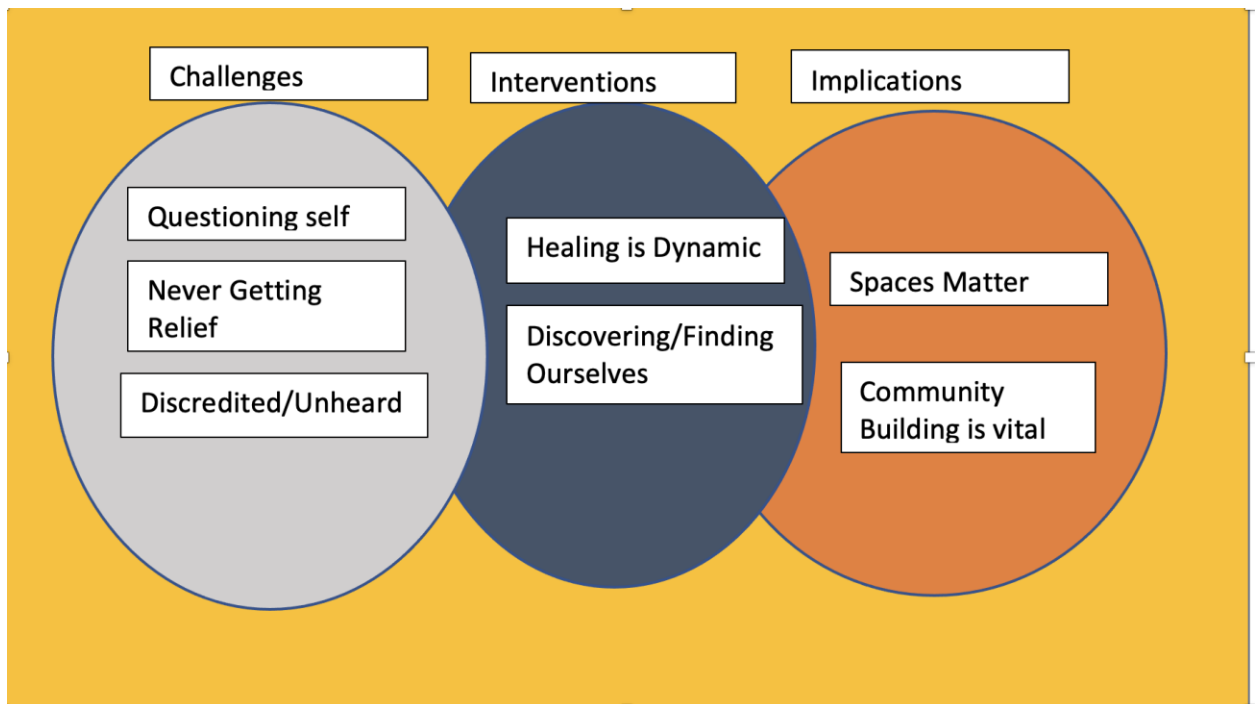
### **Implications of Research**

Sistas within the sista circle made comments throughout the study of the circles not feeling like “research” where information was being extracted from them like sometimes research can consist of when doing qualitative or quantitative research. Sista’s expressed that it was a way to collaborate and find ways together to heal after hearing each other narratives. This study not only highlights the beauty of Sista Circle methodology and what it can bring when exploring experiences but also the importance of critical research methodologies. Critical research methodologies, when working with people of color, can allow the participants to connect on a deeper level due to having a theoretical lens and methodology aligned to their identity. The use of using critical research methodologies also allows members voices to be uplifted and heard in the manner the participants want it to be represented in research.

Using critical-based methodologies in research allows the researcher to be more intentional and empathetic and have a shared balance of power dynamics within research. When the researcher can become one with the population being studied, it can be healing

and powerful for the members engaging in the research. This study highlights the importance of researchers continuing to push and honor critical research methodologies when working with diverse individuals.

To summarize the discussion section, I developed a visual below that organizes the themes to inform researchers, counselors, and anyone else who reads this study about how the knowledge within themes can be applied. The sorting of the themes helps inform the challenges Black Graduate Women face to the interventions/approaches that counselors can begin to think about to the implications that the use of Sista Circle Methodology has revealed when it comes to Black Graduate women talking about their race-based traumatic stress.



**Figure 9: Visual of Themes**

### **Boundaries of the Study/Future Directions**

I have chosen not to label this section as “limitations,” adopting the language and perspective that other sistas scholars (Cokley, 2020; Johnson, 2015 & Lacy, 2017) have used in their studies. Using the word limitations would not be congruent with the theories chosen for this study and will contradict the work done within the study. However, an area where the study could have been enhanced was the amount of sistas circles conducted. Many of the sistas in the circle expressed they wanted the groups longer to discuss in deeper detail their racial stress and ways to heal. Sistas loved the healing circles; they asked to continue the circles after the conclusion of the research due to starting something rich and stopping abruptly. When this study is conducted again, I, as the researcher, will extend the number of sista circles and increase the period of time the members were in the circles.

Even though members in the circle had control of the protocol each week through contacting the researcher or stating what they would like in the journals due to the fast pace of the circles being week to week, this could have potentially prevented members from entirely adding to the group due to trying to process each group and only have 6-7 days to do so before attending the next group. Without time constraints, it would have been ideal to have the groups be every two weeks versus weekly to allow members time to reflect and engage fully in the protocol creation.

Lastly, this study only took place at the University of Georgia, focusing on graduate women, who often discussed their racial stress resulting from past experiences and being in the space at the University of Georgia. It would be a future study to have a

sista circle hosted with Black graduate women from multiple universities to explore if location shifts the data or if similar narratives would still be reported. There is much more work to be done with Black Graduate Women and the use of sista circles exploring race-based traumatic stress and healing.

### **Conclusion**

This article outlines my dissertation study, including the theoretical and methodological frameworks, study bounds, findings, and implications for the counseling profession, research, and advocacy. The most important takeaway from this study is that race-based traumatic stress for Black graduate women causes them to feel silent/unheard, isolated, and untrusting of others outside of their race. However, even with all the things race-based traumatic stress brings, the sistas all were able to identify healing as dynamic, meaning ongoing, and must be intentional to heal from RBTS. Sistas also identified the importance of having a community that will uplift, validate, and listen to the experiences to reach healing.

The dissertation study adds to the literature surrounding Black Graduate women. Previous chapters noted that most studies with Black women consist of undergraduate students or Black faculty/staff. Within this study, having the circles be in members' homes versus a community setting was different from the previous studies. I believe the circles inside the sista home allowed the space to become more sacred than previous studies that have utilized sista circles. The study also adds more knowledge on race-based traumatic stress symptoms and how they present in Black women pursuing higher education degrees. Research discussing race-based traumatic stress tends to group genders together when discussing racial groups and how they experience race-based

traumatic stress. The findings from the study allow counselors and researchers to see how race-based traumatic stress looks specifically for Black women versus Black people as a whole. We (sistas) contributed to the literature from this study by infusing expressive art components within our journal reflections and during the circles to encapsulate experiences, feelings, and thoughts. In sista circle methodology studies expressive art was missing from the previous studies. In sista circles that have been around for 100s of years there has always been various expressive modalities (music, writing, collaging etc.) for the sistas to engage in circles. Not all sista circles talk the entire time and this study provided insight on how inviting expressive arts influenced the findings and our discussions.

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**Chapter 4: THE MOMENT I BROKE STATUS QUO AS A BLACK WOMAN <sup>3</sup>**

3

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<sup>3</sup> Grinnage, D. To be submitted to Critical Departures in Qualitative Research

### **Abstract**

Chapter four will provide a brief reflectivity that serves as an as a reflexivity during this dissertation study. A reflexivity is where researcher provides perspective and background of their selves in relation to the research topic, participants, and processes of the research (Skukauskaite et al., 2021). A reflexivity section within qualitative research allows outsider readers understand what the processes researcher was endured before, during and after a study. A Reflectivity also allows for readers to understand and gain insight on why the researcher chose the various methods, theories, or participants along with understanding the variables that influenced the way the data was interpreted.

Research dealing with racial trauma has been a challenging topic to explore as a Black Woman in America. Providing insight into the author's experience on doing healing work for people of color dealing with racial trauma is vital for researchers to know if they want to do this work to heal racial trauma. Within chapter four I aim to be transparent with my anger, frustration, sadness, and even isolated moments around this topic when engaging in this healing work.

### **Contextualizing my Study**

As young as I could remember, I knew my skin color meant I would be treated differently. I also knew early on the importance of spaces and how I needed to change or code switch in different spaces. I have always been curious about how spaces, racial identity, and trauma all impact people of color and, in particular, Black people.

In my early years of K-4, I was in spaces with predominantly black students, teachers, and administrators. Upon moving to an area that was less racially diverse, I

went from blending to being the one of only when going into white spaces. Racial trauma was something I encountered outside of school, but until 4th grade, racial trauma did not touch me in school-based settings. After 4th grade, not only was I experiencing it outside of school, but I also encountered it inside of school.

Throughout the remainder of my K-12 years, the influence of media, negative messages, and microaggressions constantly made me question my worth and racial identity. I began to view it as a barrier and identity I had begun to hate. It wasn't until I went to an HBCU that I fell in love with who I was and what I brought to the table.

In my four years at an HBCU, I was able to reclaim the love of my racial identity, understand the true history of my race, and rewrite all the negative messages/beliefs I experienced that contributed to my racial trauma. During my four years, this is where I was introduced to critical race theory and how it can be used to produce counter-narratives, uplift silent voices, and speak the actual history that is often not told to oppress people of color further. I carried this theory with me into my graduate school years.

In graduate school (masters & doctoral), I was challenged, questioned, and often disregarded in spaces. I became hypervigilant, avoidant, and even angry during my graduate years. I also remember feeling that it does not matter how many degrees I have my race will always be something to be oppressed. I knew my research and passion was fighting this oppression while spreading awareness.

As a counselor, I realized how much I experienced race-based traumatic stress and knew what it was, but struggled finding aligned interventions and solutions for my clients who have experienced similar trauma, which further fired me up to this research

topic. Before engaging in this topic through dissertation I felt I was doing a disservice to my clients by not really digging into the interventions already out there to handle race based traumatic stress.

I chose to focus on Black Graduate Women because, as a Black Graduate Woman myself, I felt this was the time in my life when I needed the most closure and healing. I felt my race-based traumatic stress was the highest during this time, and I wanted to not only study this further but also help other Black graduate women in the same place as me.

I wanted to explore my topic using a critical approach and critical methodology because anything that was not critical was not made for my population. I also knew it would not highlight or amplify the voices effectively. I searched to find what best aligned with how I wanted to engage in research that worked with my values, morals, and beliefs. Sista Circle Methodology while using the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory and Black feminist thought aligned with my direction and goals for my dissertation study.

### **Balancing Roles: Researcher, Counselor, Sista, and a Graduate Student**

Throughout this study, from beginning to end, I struggled between multiple roles, such as researcher, sista circle member, counselor, and a Black graduate female. I often felt these roles all merging into one and fought hard at first to separate them. Midway through this study, I realized that each of these identities drove my passion and dedication to this work. Merging these various roles drove my passion because I was able to understand all of me needs to be part of this study not just some identities I hold. I realized if I was asking the sistas to be authentic and bring all their various roles they carry I had to do the same to completely immerse myself in the sista circles.

As stated earlier, I have been curious about race, trauma, and spaces for as long as I can remember. I have always questioned the true narratives, where the real history is, and why we continue to silence voices that need to be heard.

I realized all my identities stated above really helped me with the way I approached this study through my recruiting, data collection, analysis because, as a researcher, I knew I had to be concerned about ethics, analysis and validity of this study, while as a sister circle member and the main researcher, I knew at times I had to remove my researcher hat to become a member truly and within the circles. To indeed be my authentic self, I had to take my Eurocentric researcher hat off that had taught me what counted as research and what is deemed as valid research. I had to understand that each voice discussing their experience automatically made the study valid because Black women's voices are knowledgeable and valid (Collins 1992). I had to work hard to change my mindset of Eurocentric research standards to truly immerse in my study.

As a researcher and doctoral candidate, I also know I have an agenda and research questions to explore before graduating, which made me feel tense about not extracting information and being supportive of members. Historically, Black people have been used in research inappropriately, and I did not want to add to that history. I wanted to make members feel heard, respected, and valued.

Working with members who identify with similar experiences and are in graduate school as Black women made it hard not to get caught up in the frustration and feelings of defeat. I felt we were all going through terrible things inside and outside of school revolving around RBTS. It was hard not to feel tired and wearied out after these sister

circle meetings because I was not just hearing members' stories; I was also remembering all my own racial traumatic stories that contributed to my stress.

At times during the circle, when I could feel members' pain as they shared their narratives, I wanted to put my counselor hat on to validate them at the moment. Being a counselor also helped me understand that within this study for myself and members, this study is only the foundation of healing. Healing must be continuous, and this study will not "fix" or heal anyone completely from their stress and experiences.

### **Working with an all-white committee**

Having an all-white committee and doing race-based research was a challenge. Before conducting the study, I had a lot of anxiety even presenting this topic to my committee. I worried I would need to explain and cite every little thing I could find on this topic to make sure they knew it was necessary. Up until the completion of the study, I was having feelings of "I shouldn't be doing this, what if they do not approve or discount our narratives?" I felt like I was doing something I shouldn't be.

To manage balancing my vulnerability and protecting myself with an all-white committee I engaged in mentorship with other Black women who have guided me throughout this dissertation process and in my doctoral program. I even reached out to one of the Sista Circle scholars who I cited to gain insight on ways to report back to my committee when discussing the study. Any time I questioned myself or had doubt I would immediately connect to my mentors to process my thoughts before addressing any issues I had with my chair who is a white male.

I realized now that society has set up people of color to feel this way when they choose to speak up and break the status quo. I also know change is never comfortable,

and if I want things to change regarding society and the counseling profession and how it addresses racial trauma and stress, I must speak up and out to people who don't racially identify the same as me. I now know this is the beginning of change within my career as a counselor educator.

Nobody in my committee had directly attacked me regarding this study, but just their racial identity and my past experiences made me hyper-vigilant throughout this study. My committee was supportive when they could be, but at the end of the day, I knew they would never experience the feelings I felt regarding racial trauma.

I had to find the balance between sharing information to inform the committee of what I was doing and not teaching them because, as a Black female, I have educated others so many times on aspects of my racial identity. I'm just tired of giving in to educating others versus encouraging them to research it on their own.

I also felt the need to protect my members and myself significantly by omitting anything I thought could trace members' identity because I knew some things stated in the circles would not be viewed as appropriate by an all-white committee due to their lack of understanding of what feels like daily to be in a Black body receiving racial trauma since elementary to now and develop severe stress and self-esteem issues. Having constant racial trauma and racial stress has directly impacted how I view feedback from my committee. In my dissertation journey I often immediately negatively internalized feedback provided from members. Whenever I received negative feedback and felt myself internalizing, I sought out my mentors to help clarify and release negative mental noise I had during dissertation.

### **Thoughts on Sista Circle Methodology**

Sista Circle methodology continues to rise in research to collect data to describe Black Women's experiences. What I loved the most about this methodology throughout the study is its ability to be as directive or nondirective as you want it to be; this methodology allowed me to be free from the constraints I, and my members are often put under at and outside of school. This method allowed us to show up as we are and just let down any hurt or pain we experienced with racial trauma.

#### **Use of expressive arts**

Staying true to the sista circle methodology and sister circles outside of research, I chose to infuse expressive arts within the circles. I chose to do this because sometimes, with trauma, stress, and healing, we don't have the words to express ourselves. However, we can color, paint, collage, or even listen to music to let out our experiences. I intentionally added this component to grasp the members' experiences in ways other than words.

#### **Sacred Circles**

Members could host the circles at home or in a local library meeting room. Upon the first circle, all members agreed to take turns hosting it in their homes and having food. I believe having food and being in safe spaces allow us to cultivate such meaningful memories and healing for us as a whole. For each circle, we all took turns cooking/bringing in food. We discussed family history and recipes during these circles, along with still addressing the research. Each member could be their authentic self during these circles, and the journals reflected that.

**To future researchers who choose to use this methodology**

The beautiful thing about this methodology is it allows you to add components such as art while still staying true to the methodology. My message to future scholars choosing this methodology is to lean in on how you want your data to look or be collected throughout this process. Formulate your data collection methods based on your research questions. Feel free to investigate other ways to collect data outside of words. Know that all information can be valid when the intention is there. Every sista within my group expressed feeling heard and loved the ways we approached conversations by having a non-structure approach.

**Lesson Learned****We are HERE**

From this study, I learned that I'm not alone in my experiences. A common theme throughout the circles was feelings of isolation growing up and present day with myself and all members. From this study, I now understand other Black women are going through very similar experiences as me, and we can support each other if we come together. When coming together Black women can do much more work by leaning on each other as we explore ways to heal.

**Spaces are important**

I always knew the impact of spaces. However, this study has further confirmed my thoughts about spaces. This study has helped me understand that when people of color get in spaces where others look like them and have similar experiences, it can create a beautiful dialogue, cohesion, and solutions to things that need to change that contribute to RBTS. As a counselor educator in training this study has caused me to think about

ways, I can make sure my students feel included in the classroom. I think about what ways I can honor their various identities in the classroom space. As a counselor it makes me think about ways I can continue to challenge and question myself to think about ways to make my clinical practice more open to diversity by re-analyzing my approaches, theories, and treatment planning styles.

### **Critical research IS RESEARCH!**

From beginning to end, I had learned to become more comfortable with using critical-based methodologies. After collecting data from the circles, journals, and artwork, I realized these various forms of data is valid and important research. I hope this study and other studies using critical methodologies allow for researchers to shift what they consider valid research.

It can be so easy to discredit a methodology such as a sister circle because it is a flexible methodology where each scholar has done something different and is mainly geared to their research questions. When engaging in critical research, it is essential to know that not every step in your study is meant to be repeated by others because some moments are so sacred that other people cannot read the study and repeat with the same results. It does not mean the study isn't valid or incorrect, and you can still contribute to the research gaps regarding your topic.

## Conclusion

This chapter aimed to provide a detailed internal process I, as the researcher, experienced throughout this dissertation study, along with sharing the lessons I learned in my dissertation study. Providing reflexivity when engaging in race-based critical research allows others to understand some of the mental challenges that can occur along with ways to handle them. When people read this chapter, they will understand the incredible amount of mental effort critical research takes because, as the researcher, one is doing things out of the norm (status quo) when trying to make a liberation approach. I had concluded that meeting my research goals meant breaking the general research standards and pushing myself and my dissertation committee to understand why critical research methodologies are essential when working with racially marginalized individuals in research studies. From this study I believe as a Black Graduate woman, I have finally broken the status quo in an academic space.

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## APPENDENCIES

### Appendix A: Consent

#### Consent

**Study Title:** Using Sista Circle Methodology to Explore Race Based Traumatic Stress with Black Graduate Women in Higher Educational Spaces

#### Researcher Statement:

I am asking you to participate in this qualitative research study entitled **Using Sista Circle Methodology to Explore Race Based Traumatic Stress with Black Graduate Women in Higher Educational Spaces**. The purpose of this form is to provide you with the information that you need to decide if you want to participate in this study. If any questions, comments, or concerns arise as you review this document, please let me know. When all your questions have been answered, you can make a decision regarding whether or not you would like to participate. This form is called informed consent. Upon signing a copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator: George McMahon, Ph.D  
 Department of Counseling and Human Development Services  
 Clinical Associate Professor & Department Head  
 University of Georgia  
[gcmahon@uga.edu](mailto:gcmahon@uga.edu)

Co-Investigator: Deaetta Grinnage  
 Department of Counseling and Human Development Services  
 University of Georgia  
 Deaetta.Grinnage@uga.edu

#### Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to utilize Sista Circle Methodology to better understand the lived experiences of Black Graduate Woman that have experienced racial based traumatic stress inside and outside educational spaces and promote healing to racial trauma. There is currently a gap within literature regarding a focus on Black Graduate Woman and the barriers they experience that impacts their ability to progress through graduate school. There is further gap within the counseling profession regarding experiences and ways to address racebased traumatic stressBlack Women experience. Inclusion criteria for the study are: Identify as a Black Cisgender Woman, A graduate student at University of Georgia (Masters or Doctoral), between the ages 22-45 and has experienced a racial trauma that has impacted your emotional and psychological well-being inside and outside of educational spaces.

#### Study Procedures:

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to:

- Take part in a 30–45-minute pre-interview at a time and location that is convenient for you.
- Participate in a total of four 60–90-minute hour group talks (called sista circles) focusing on racial based traumatic stress and the identity of being a Black Graduate woman at a location and time that is convenient for all participants. There will be one virtual group talk and three in person group talks. Members will be able to attend the scheduled in person group talks virtually if they have an illness, emergency or personal reason that prevents them from coming in for the three in-person group talks. All group meetings will be audio recorded.
- Participate in one virtual 60–90-minute audio recorded meeting as a follow up to go over preliminary findings as a group.
- In additions to the pre-screening interview and group talks, you will be asked to record in journals to reflect after each group talk.
- Participate in an audio-recorded individual post interview at a time and location that is convenient for you, if you cannot make the follow up virtual group or want to speak with researcher further.

**Risks:**

- Participants may experience feelings of discomfort or stress.
- You may choose not to answer any questions asked during the interviews or group talks that you are uncomfortable addressing Additionally participant (you) may exit the study at any time.

**Benefits:**

- An opportunity to share, learn and connect from other Black Graduate Women.
- An opportunity to contribute to the knowledge that aids counselors' educators and future counselors in training on ways to heal from race based traumatic stress.

**Alternatives:**

This study does not involve any experimental treatment, therapy, or intervention.

**Incentives for Participation:**

- Participant will receive a 10.00 visa gift card per a group that you attend. Total compensation if participant has attended all 5 groups will be 50.00. Monetary incentive will be awarded at the conclusion of ALL groups.
- Participants will connect with other Black Graduate Women that have similar experiences.

**Audio/Video Recording:**

The researcher will audio-record the interviews and the group talks for the purposes of later transcription and use in documenting results of the study. All recorded and written data will be secured in the researcher's locked cabinet and will be password protected on

computer. Upon completion of research, the data will be coded to avoid any individually identifiable information. The recordings upon completion of study will be destroyed.

**Privacy/Confidentiality:**

Your name will not be utilized when this data is published. Only the researcher will have access to data. Researcher will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law. Even though researcher will emphasize to all participants in the group talks to keep information confidential it is possible participants in the group talks may repeat comments/information outside of the group at some time in the future. Every effort will be made to ensure privacy and confidentiality of your identifying information.

**Rights as Participant:**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return or destroy the information.

**Questions:**

The main researcher conducting this study is Deaetta Grinnage, a graduate student at the University of Georgia. If you have any questions, comments or concerns before signing this document please contact via email at [Deaetta.Grinnage@uga.edu](mailto:Deaetta.Grinnage@uga.edu) or at 302-423-5754. If you have questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact Institutional Review Board (IRB) chairperson at 706-542-3199 or [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu)

**Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:**

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form and have had all of your questions answered.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher                      Signature                      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant                      Signature                      Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

## Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

### Are you Interested in Healing from Racial Trauma?

We are conducting a dissertation research study that will look at Race Based Traumatic Stress within Higher educational spaces with Black Graduate Women using Sista Healing Circle Methodology. This research is designed to better understand the lived experiences and promote healing to racial trauma.

Participants will be eligible to receive up to 50.00 compensation in total.



**Mary Frances Early  
College of Education**  
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

This study is being conducted by Deaetta Grinnage and under the direction of George McMahon may be reached at [gmcMahon@uga.edu](mailto:gmcMahon@uga.edu)

#### Who IS Invited?

- Graduate student at University of Georgia
- Doctoral or Masters Student
- Identifies as a Black Woman

#### DESCRIPTION OF STUDY

- Participants will complete a total of four in person Sista healing circle groups and a follow-up group online.
- Risks: may include feelings of discomfort or stress. Participants may exit the study at any time.
- Benefits: include an opportunity to contribute to the knowledge that aids counselor educators and future counselors.
- The chance to start the healing and liberation journey towards racial trauma experienced.

#### INTERESTED?



## Appendix C: Pre-Interview Protocol

### Pre-Interview Protocol

These questions below will be asked during an individual meeting where each participant that responded to flyer or email will be asked when meeting with researcher in person or on a virtual space. The purpose of a pre-interview BEFORE the start of sista circles is to verify inclusion criteria, go over informed consent, Sista Circle Methodology (tenets and expectations) and to review the RBTS conceptual model to see if participant identifies with having an experience of a racial trauma to be eligible for the group.

Pre-Interview will take 30-45 minutes in total. Interview can take place in person or on virtual space.

1. Name
2. Age
3. Pseudonym Name: Researcher will ask participant what name they would like for group if chosen to participate
4. What year are you in your masters or doctoral program?
5. What is your Major/Program?
6. How has racial based traumatic stress shown up in your lived experiences and how has it impacted you as a student and personally?
7. What are you looking forward to if you choose to participate in the Sista Circle groups?
8. Have you participated in a Sista circle group before?
9. Are you willing commit to 4 in person groups and 1 virtual (60–90-minute groups) over a period of 6 weeks?
10. What days and times work best for you to meet for a in person group?
11. How far are you willing to drive to attend the 4 in person groups? (Groups will be no more than 40 miles out from UGA Athens campus; groups will NOT be held on any UGA location)
12. Are you comfortable with completing reflection journals after each sista circle group?
13. Any salient identities (religious, ability status, sexual orientation, SES) outside of identifying as a woman and Black that you would like to share that are important to highlight if you choose to join this group?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share?

### **Appendix D: Sista Circle Script**

Greetings ladies, As always I wanted to thank you for dedicating the time to collaborate and work together in today's sista circle. Our amount of time for our sister circle is scheduled for 60-90 min. I would like for each of you to note that I will be audio recording today's session. The purpose of recording is to ensure my notes and observations remain accurate. After all transcripts have been made all audio recordings will be deleted. When speaking in recorded sessions please state your name prior to making a comment or asking a question. This will help me keep your responses organized.

I am a researcher studying the experiences of Black Graduate women experiencing race based traumatic stress. Our groups will be formulated around my research question which is : What knowledge/information is generated from Black Graduate Women in sista circles regarding racial-based traumatic stress and healing from RBTS? In laymans terms I want to explore what knowledge/experiences do we have as Black graduate women experiencing RBTS and how do collaborate and identify/promote healing from these experiences. This study is a qualitative approach which means I will be collecting data centering your perspectives, viewpoints and overall experiences. It is my goal that everyone voice and perspective is heard throughout each sister circle.

All the information that I collect will remain confidential. Any direct quotes used in this dissertation or future publications will be logged under a pseudo name. It is my hope that these guidelines will aid you in openly sharing your thoughts.

Finally, Please recognize that this sista circle is intended to be a brave and power conscious space. If at any time you do not feel comfortable answering a questions, please do not feel pressured to do so. Any questions?

## **Appendix E: Sista Circle Protocols**

### **SISTA Circle Group 1 Protocol**

#### **Theme: Introduction**

##### Step 1: Welcome

Welcome everyone that has come to join the sista circle. The goal is to build rapport for this space and food will be provided.

##### Step 2: Consent

Go over verbally the consent form and purpose of the study with a script (Will send script still formulating) that will be used EVERY sista circle. This is to remind the sistas the purpose and the ability to leave the circle whenever they would want to .

##### Step 4: Begin Recordings (Audio)

##### Step 5: Start Sista Circle

Introductions: Name, Year in school/Program, hobbies, other salient identities you bring,

##### Step 6: Activity

Show the RBTS emotional injury model (Carter, 2007)

Show a video informing what is a sista circle: [https://youtu.be/Mas\\_G050mZQ?si=evJI5-uR1ScCJ3X](https://youtu.be/Mas_G050mZQ?si=evJI5-uR1ScCJ3X)

Have follow up questions that consist of:

What feelings are coming up for you in this moment (opportunity to verbally or artistically express self (music, drawing, poetry, phrase etc.)

What is your WHY for being here

What do you hope this group will bring?

What is needed to make this space healing between each other? What do you want our other three groups to look like?

##### Step 7: Closing

Asking sistas what topics will they like to discuss over the next three groups? How do you want to use your time in this healing space to process and heal from racial trauma inside and outside educational spaces.

Stop Recordings. Thank everyone. Answer Questions

Step 8: Provide a follow up email with thanks and next group information along with a secure link to enter journal reflection. Journal reflections are due before the next group starts. No length requirement. If sistas want to draw, add music etc they are more than welcome etc. keep their own written journal I will scan and upload in a password protected folder.

#### **Guiding prompts**

Is there anything you want to share that was not shared in sista circle group #1?

Any thoughts or reactions regarding this first group?  
How would you describe your experience with participating in this sista circle?

### **Sister Circle Group 2 Protocol**

#### **Theme: What is Your Story?**

##### Step 1: Welcome & Read Script

Welcome everyone that has come to join the sista circle number two. Discuss the goal for today is to discuss our various experiences while also support each other

##### Step 2: Check in

##### Step 3: Consent

Have any remaining members who have not signed consents sign while in person.

##### Step 4: Discuss journal and trouble shoot the issues

##### Step 5: Acknowledge Current issues possibly impacting group

Claudine Gay: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/claudine-gay-harvard-universitys-embattled-president-stepping-rcna131930>

##### Moment of Silence for Antoinette Candia-Bailey

<https://abcnews.go.com/US/hbcu-administrators-death-suicide-prompts-calls-presidents-resignation/story?id=106463624>

##### Step 6: Check in with **COLORS**

Have members check in with paint colors (Check in Created by Researcher and another member)

##### Step 7: WHAT IS YOUR WHY? Why does this group call to you? What is your story?

To start conversations of experiences that have sparked race based stress researcher will show two clips that show Black individuals experiencing events in their social interactions and work settings. This is to show how easily race trauma and the stress can be brought on in simple places.

##### Videos

[https://youtu.be/SCijS9vAWPw?si=YkKGRB\\_xbfAX0ZNT](https://youtu.be/SCijS9vAWPw?si=YkKGRB_xbfAX0ZNT)

##### GET OUT

<https://youtu.be/9j6p7ajuh-E?si=8MoVbtIHNcibId0J>

##### Hidden Figures

##### Guiding Prompts

Have each member discuss their experience (WHY).

Prompts to guide conversation

What is your earliest and most recent memory of racial identity?

What have messages have these memories created for you?

**Step 8: Uplift**

Discuss after hearing experiences how can we move to action  
 What will our last two groups consist of that consist of action (Art, music, collage, workshops etc)

**Sista Circle Protocol #3****Theme : Action Healing**

Step 1: Get food & wait for everyone to arrive

**Step 2: Welcome & Read Script**

Welcome everyone that has come to join the sista circle number two. Discuss the goal for today is to discuss our various experiences while also support each other

**Step 3: Housekeeping/Announcements**

Journals, transcripts

**Step 4: Check in**

Done by two members

**Step 5: Discussions about Healing****Guiding Prompts:**

Read quote:

"The soul always knows what to do to heal itself. The challenge is to silence the mind. "

"Healing doesn't mean the damage never occurred it just means the damage no longer controls your life"

What do you need from us to help process and start healing for racial trauma?

How has racial trauma impacted you psychologically and what is the narrative you want to create to avoid further psychological damage ?

If you could release your trauma into something tangible what would it be? Could you create it, write it or find a song about it?

**Step 6: Check out**

How do you want to wrap our last in person space?

Group collage, group playlists etc?

Plan next group when and where?

**Sister Circle Group Protocol #4**

### **Theme: Thriving, Healing and Closing**

Step 1: Get food & wait for everyone to arrive

Step 2: Welcome & Read Script

Welcome everyone that has come to join the sista circle number two. Discuss the goal for today is to continue to discuss and express our healing.

Step 3: Check in

Step 4: Group Activity

Discuss what are ways we can encapsulate this experience today.

Examples:

Painting

Drawing

Collage

Music playlist

### **Guiding questions**

What has this experience meant to you and you're healing with racial trauma?

How will you take this experience to finish your graduate program?

### **Step 5: Check out Group Activity**

Affirmation's activity-Pass the affirmation.

### **Sista Circle Protocol 5**

#### **Theme: Member Checking**

Step 1: Check in-Have each member check in

Step 2: Main researcher will explain the coding and analysis process

Step 3: Main researcher will go over preliminary themes and receive feedback

Step 4: Address any comments, questions or concerns

Step 5: Discuss when the incentives will be given out

## **Appendix F: Reflection Journal Prompts**

### **Sista Circle 1 Reflection Prompts:**

1. Is there anything you want to share that was not shared in sista circle group #1?
2. Any thoughts or reactions regarding this first group?
3. How would you describe your experience with participating in this sista circle?
4. What topics do you want the next group to consist of? How do you want us to hold space to discuss our negative racialized experiences?

### **Sista Circle 2 Reflection Prompts**

1. What are your thoughts with the sister circle group now, especially now that we are in person?
2. Is there way you want your voice heard that you feel you aren't getting right now.
3. How did it feel sharing your stories to other Black Women?
4. How do you want these put to action/start healing circles to go for our last circle (Art, music, collage etc.)
5. Do you have any other questions, concerns or thoughts.

### **Sista Circle 3 Reflection Prompts**

1. How will you put your healing into action after this recent sister circle?
2. How did the members facilitate your journey to healing today?
3. Is there something you feel you haven't shared that you would like to disclose to group for our last circle.
4. Any reactions or thoughts about next circle being the last in person content based circle.

### **Sista Circle 4 Reflection Prompts**

1. Did you enjoy the last sister circle?
2. Is there anything you felt was left unsaid?
3. Would you suggest a sister healing circle to other Black women, if so why?
4. Any questions, comments or concerns?