STILL, I RISE . . . USING SISTA CIRCLES TO EXPLORE THE LIVED

EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN WHO ATTEND(ED) HISTORICALLY WHITE

INSTITUTIONS AS UNDERGRADUATES

by

WANDA L. JOHNSON

(Under the Direction of Ginny J. Boss)

ABSTRACT

The demographics of people attending higher education institutions are changing as more women enroll and complete their studies. Initially not designed to educate women, and certainly not Black women, institutions of higher education do not show interest in exploring ways in which they could make their campuses more inclusive to Black women. Likely victims of their own success, Black undergraduate women often face isolation, microaggressions, and lack of representation as they matriculate through the halls of higher education at predominantly white institutions. Using narrative analysis, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and reveal the experiences of Black women who attended an historically white institution as an undergraduate. Through their stories, insight was gained about their trials and tribulations as they persisted to completion. Their stories, although unique to each individual, shared similarities in experiences, highlighting that even at differing institutions, some practices and experiences remain the same. Through sista circles, the sista scholars were able to share their stories in a safe place and receive support and acknowledgment of their

experiences. This validation is central to the principles of Black feminist thought and endarkened feminist epistemology, the frameworks that undergirded and guided this study. The results of this study supported current literature on the experiences of undergraduate Black women at HWIs. The implications for practice and future research are designed to hopefully bring about transformative changes to help create inclusive learning environments for all, especially Black women.

INDEX WORDS: Black feminist thought, Endarkened feminist epistemology, Intersectionality, Historically white, HWI, Undergraduate Black woman, Success

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Brian, my husband, friend, and greatest supporter. You have been and continue to be one of the best things to have happened to me. Your unwavering support for me as I pursued this degree allowed me to focus and get it down. You held me accountable and would not let me give up. For that, I am forever grateful. I love you! We did this!

Kendyl and Khloe—our greatest accomplishments! You two are the joys of our lives and without you, we shudder to think what life would be like. Each time you saw me with my computer, you would say, "Mommy is working." You will never know how those words both lifted me and crushed me! I persevered because of you. I love you both more than you will ever know!

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For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.

—Jeremiah 29:11, *King James Version Bible*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

You may write me down in history / With your bitter, twisted lies, / You may trod me in the very dirt/ But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you? / Why are you beset with gloom?/ 'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells / Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns, / With the certainty of tides, / Just like hopes springing high, / Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken? / Bowed head and lowered eyes? / Shoulders falling down like teardrops, / Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you? / Don't you take it awful hard/ 'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines / Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words, / You may cut me with your eyes, / You may kill me with your hatefulness, / But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you? / Does it come as a surprise / That I dance like I've got diamonds / At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame / I rise / Up from a past that's rooted in pain / I rise / I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide, / Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear / I rise / Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear / I rise / Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, / I am the dream and the hope of the slave. / I rise / I rise / I rise.

—Maya Angelou, *Still I Rise*

I read *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou several times growing up. Each time I read the poem, it evoked feelings I could not understand or put into words. I was not able to grasp this poem's meaning and its powerful message until my 1st year at college. The poem takes the reader on an emotional rollercoaster. The words of the poem are a journey that focuses on trauma, womanliness, being Black, and perseverance. The poem speaks to bold defiance in the face of oppression and the beauty and power of being Black. This poem transports me back to my struggles in secondary and postsecondary education. Oftentimes, I found myself as the only Black student in my classes. This scenario presented challenges for me because many people thought I did not belong and could not perform at the level needed to be successful in my classes. However, I overcame the naysayers and proved I was right where I needed AND deserved to be.

As a young Black undergraduate woman, I found myself constantly questioning my abilities based on my experiences or encounters with others. I found myself in unwelcoming spaces and felt I had to work twice as hard to prove my abilities. This experience was taxing. I often questioned why I was doing this to myself. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, my peers and my instructors were creating an environment that was not pleasant for my collegiate success. Support services and other Black women became my lifeline. I was able to push past the negative experiences to achieve my goal of having a great collegiate experience. Along the way, I experienced validation that I

was good enough, I deserved to be in those spaces, and was encouraged to be open and honest about how I was feeling and what I was going through.

Reflecting on my own experiences made me wonder if other Black undergraduate women have similar experiences. Additionally, I wondered what, if any, proactive measures higher education had taken to support Black women as they matriculated at institutions of higher education, more specifically historically white institutions (HWIs). College is an experience designed to cultivate young minds into worldly scholars. About 20 years after my first encounter with college life, I still pondered if higher education had made efforts toward creating an inclusive environment that supported the growth and development of all students, specifically Black women.

Background of the Problem

Undergraduate Black women at HWIs are often lauded for overcoming adversity (Haynes, 2019). Their resilience is seen as a strength and a testament to their ability to be successful at institutions of higher education (Haynes, 2019; Winkle-Wagner, 2015); however, many Black women often report feelings of marginalization, microaggressions, and oppression, resulting in racial battle fatigue (Corbin et al., 2018; Kelly, Gardner, et al., 2021; Winkle-Wagner, 2015) as they persist at HWIs of higher education. The myth of Black women having achieved prominent levels of educational attainment provided the perfect cover for institutions to not address the struggles Black women face (Rosales & Persons, 2003). Understanding the lived experiences of Black women is an important, yet often overlooked, part of fostering an inclusive environment and supporting student success in college, particularly at HWIs (Miller, 2017; Winkle-Wagner, 2015).

While conducting initial research, I discovered Black undergraduate women still face negative experiences during their college years. According to Miller (2017), family responsibilities, lack of social integration, and involvement are significant challenges Black female undergraduate students face on campus. Haynes (2019) highlighted the immense potential to delve into the perceptions of Black women regarding their personal college journeys. After careful consideration, gaining a more profound understanding of those experiences was crucial and required additional scrutiny.

Higher education was not created with people of color, and especially not Black women, in mind as the main participants. As such, these spaces create a disconnect for most students of color. Undergraduate Black women are not immune. According to Corbin et al. (2018), Black women found themselves on the defensive daily while dealing with racial microaggressions in predominantly or historically white spaces such as higher education institutions. Persistence for undergraduate Black women can be a challenge because they face double jeopardy or a dual burden (Miller, 2017; Porter & Dean, 2015; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). *Double jeopardy* refers to Black women's membership in multiple marginalized populations and sheds light on the importance of reviewing intersectionality when looking for ways to improve their experiences. Despite all the obstacles Black women face at HWIs, they manage to be successful (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). The achievement can lead to the misconception they can thrive without any assistance or resources (Everett & Croom, 2017).

Problem Statement

Black women college students' voices and experiences are frequently overlooked in the wider college student narrative (Commodore et al., 2021). Institutions of higher

education can no longer operate under the assumption that a single approach works for everyone. Scott (2017) stated it is time for universities to wake up to the reality that simply increasing access to higher education (e.g., enrolling more students) does not increase the likelihood of success for those students. More attention and resources are needed to ameliorate the challenges students of color face, specifically Black women. To create and foster an inclusive and nurturing environment, understanding the experiences of undergraduate Black women and working to provide better support for them is important.

To offer better assistance to Black female undergraduate students, higher education institutions need to reassess their definition of achievement. The achievement of obtaining a degree is often seen as a marker of success for college students; however, this narrow perspective overlooks the experiences of Black women (Porter & Byrd, 2021). Miller (2017) defined student success as whatever is needed to aid a student's progression through college. Porter and Byrd (2021) identified social and cultural capital—the ability to give meaning to one's identity—and adeptness in navigating a challenging campus environment as key markers of success for Black women. The notion of generalizing student success may potentially overlook the diverse definitions of success held by different individuals, particularly among Black women in higher education, as Winkle-Wagner (2015) emphasized.

Researchers have placed an increased focus on understanding Black women's experiences in higher education. For instance, Kelly, Gardner, et al. (2021), using convenience sampling, studied the emotional labor of Black women at HWIs in the Chicago metropolitan area. Using qualitative research methods, they interviewed Black

women at HWIs to highlight the emotional toll and stress they encountered. Throughout this study, Kelly, Gardner et al., highlighted both the hypervisibility and invisibility of Black women at HWIs. Additional researchers found similar instances of Black women feeling isolated, discriminated against, and micro-aggressed while studying at HWIs (Corbin et al., 2018; Kelly, Raines, et al., 2021; Miller, 2017). These studies opened the door for more research focusing on Black women, their intersecting identities, and their experiences on college campuses. Understanding the experiences of Black women can help higher education institutions provide needed resources and support to assist this population of students to navigate the campuses of higher education successfully.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of Black women who enrolled in or were currently enrolled in HWIs as undergraduate students. The focus was to gain insight into the challenges and opportunities these individuals encountered during their academic journeys in HWIs. I used the stories of the participants' triumphs and challenges, along with their perception of support, to narrate their experiences. For this study, I used a form of critical narrative methodology known as sista circle methodology, analyzed through the lens of Black feminist thought (BFT).

Research Questions

My research delved into the realms of gender and race through the lens of BFT and endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE; Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006) and sista circle methodology (Johnson, 2015). To comprehend their experiences, it was crucial for me to investigate how their primary identities influenced their day-to-day existence. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do Black women describe their undergraduate experiences at a historically white institution?

2. How do Black women describe the support they received as undergraduates at a historically white institution?

Analytical Framework

The research I engaged in was for Black women and by Black women. It was important for me that the components of the critical analytical framework paired well with one another. I chose BFT as my theoretical framework to ground my study and EFE as the critical lens through which to analyze the data collected by using the sista circle methodology. The research design was structured according to the principles of EFE: (a) allowing for the care of the participants, (b) allowing dialogue to help share stories, and (c) engaging in a research project that honors the participants in the study (Dillard, 2000). Sista circle methodology paired well with EFE and BFT because both seek to empower the voices of Black women by allowing them to share a common space and common thoughts. To assist with understanding and analyzing the lived experiences of the Black women participants, I used BFT and EFE in the development of questions used in the sista circles and to guide the direction of the meetings.

Theoretical Framework

BFT is a critical social theory developed by Collins (1986, 2000) that focuses on the experiences of Black women. Collins's (2000) BFT theory uses intersectionality to center the experiences of Black women. Collins (1986, 2000) believed Black women were intellectuals, arguing their storytelling and experiences constituted knowledge.

Black women are encouraged to conduct research that details their own experiences because of the rich, authentic point of view they provide (Collins, 2000).

BFT was the theoretical framework for this study and was used to analyze data. BFT provides insight into how social locations inform how Black women experience oppression and how they resist; BFT also defines a meaning-making process for Black women (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) explained through networks created by and for Black women, they find support to address self-definition and self-representation. More information on BFT is shared in Chapter 2.

EFE

Given the historical and ongoing oppression of Black women, a marginalized population of people, I used EFE (Dillard, 2000, 2006) as the lens to design the study and analyze the data. Rooted in BFT (Collins, 2000), Dillard (2000, 2008) penned EFE as a means of calling out the universal ways of knowing and conducting research. EFE provides a way of understanding and knowing Black women that consider the historical and oppressive systems of power that Black women have faced and continue to face (Dillard, 2000, 2006). The core components of EFE—spirituality and culture (Dillard, 2008)—support the ethic of care, value and respect of participants' experiences, and the responsibility of the researcher to the participants.

During this investigation, it was imperative for me to carefully consider the selection of epistemology, considering both its appropriateness and its alignment with the viewpoints of both me and the study participants. This selection was a critical aspect of the research process because it helped to ensure the findings of the study were reliable and valid and the conclusions drawn from them were sound and well supported. This

approach allowed for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the subject

matter and helped to ensure the research had a meaningful impact on the field.

Paradigms like constructivism, positivism, and post positivism were not

appropriate because their ways of understanding knowledge are rooted in oppressive and

systemic racism toward the population of people this study focused on (Collins, 2000;

Dillard, 2000, 2006). These paradigms were created by white men who used white men

as the basis for understanding reality, values, and knowledge. Constructivism, positivism,

and post positivism paradigms failed to validate Black women's ways of knowing, which

is different from the traditional view. Dillard (2000, 2006) was instrumental in

connecting the lived experiences of Black women to the cultural viewpoints of how

people come to understand their daily lives. More discussion on EFE is provided in

Chapter 2.

Sista Circle Methodology

Johnson (2015) created sista circle methodology, which is "a qualitative research

methodology and support group for examining the lived experiences of Black women"

(p. 43). Sista circle methodology focuses on women's shared bond and the importance of

language in that connection (Johnson, 2015). Johnson (2015) offered three key attributes

as defining features of sista circles: (a) communication dynamics, (b) the centrality of

empowerment, and (c) the researcher as a participant.

In this study, open communication was crucial, which led to the decision to use

the sista circle methodology for data collection. With a deep reverence for the sacred

bonds of sisterhood and communal wisdom, this methodology created a nurturing space

for participants to engage in open and authentic conversations. The essence of sista circle

methodology lies in its commitment to embracing the collective voice and honoring the diverse perspectives, experiences, and knowledge of Black women. Through facilitated dialogue in these intimate circles, participants were encouraged to share their truths, challenges, and triumphs, facilitating a rich cache of qualitative data. This methodology enabled the research process to transcend the traditional boundaries of individual interviews, inviting a collaborative and dynamic exploration of themes and insights that emerged through the collective wisdom and shared experiences of the participants. A deeper explanation of sista circles is presented in Chapter 3.

Significance of the Study

Literature on undergraduate Black women has been limited. Most of the research silences this population of students by choosing to focus either on their race (e.g., solely focused on Black students) or their gender (e.g., solely focused on women). When searching for literature on undergraduate Black women in higher education, the results included the experiences of either Black students (inclusive of all genders), students of color, or women across a range of races or ethnicities. The limited results pointed to a scarcity of literature focused primarily on undergraduate Black women in higher education. Few studies (e.g., Corbin et al., 2018; Donovan & Guillory, 2017; Everett & Croom, 2017; Kelly, Gardner, et al., 2021; Miller, 2017; Stewart, 2017) have detailed the lived experiences of undergraduate Black women at HWIs and the support they received to be successful. Porter and Byrd (2021) asserted Black women's collegiate experiences are valid, and their definitions of success are worthy of further study. The scarcity of information available indicates a gap in the research on a topic that needs to be explored to provide recommendations for practice.

This study aimed to engage Black women by using the sista circle methodology. The goal was to allow Black women to share their undergraduate stories while also building a support system for them. This study was grounded in BFT with the research design guided by EFE and sista circle methodology to help Black women share their experiences through dialogue, heal their trauma, and construct knowledge of their experiences. This study helped validate the experiences of undergraduate Black women, amplified their voices, created an opportunity for their experiences to be included in the literature, and suggested policy changes that would impact their experiences on college campuses.

Key Terms

The following is a discussion of the terms I used for this study. For this study, the term *historically white institution* (HWI) is interchangeable with *predominantly white institution*. These terms refer to an institution whose population of students is 50% or more white (Lomotey, 2010). Throughout this dissertation, historically white institution(s) will be abbreviated to HWI(s). The term *sista* is an endearing term used commonly among Black women (Dorsey, 2000). *Academic success* is a cornerstone of this study and will be used interchangeably with *student success*. Miller (2017) wrote about the various definitions used to define student success, emphasizing the most common way of defining student success is whatever is needed to aid a student's progression through college, be that personal, intellectual, general, etc. I used this viewpoint when referring to student success for this study. *Endarkened feminist epistemology* (EFE), Dillard's (2000, 2006, 2008) theoretical framework used as my paradigm, is abbreviated as EFE. *Black feminist thought* (BFT), Collins's (1986, 2000)

theoretical framework, is abbreviated to BFT. The term success carries many meanings. For this study, *success* refers to student-driven concepts as highlighted by Porter and Byrd (2021). These concepts include professional and personal advancement, development, and/or community uplift (Porter & Byrd, 2021). Lastly, I am consciously choosing to not capitalize the word white as an act of resistance in my fight against white supremacy.

Dissertation Outline

This qualitative study is outlined in five chapters. Chapter 1 provided a brief overview of the research design. Chapter 2 provides a literature review on Black undergraduate women, common experiences and support systems for undergraduate Black women, and Black feminism and intersectionality. Chapter 2 also includes an overview of the six assumptions of EFE and its use as my epistemological viewpoint. Chapter 3 details the research design, including the methodology, data collection, analysis, and authenticity. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the research study. Finally, Chapter 5 provides an interpretation of the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors that influence the undergraduate experiences of Black women at historically white institutions (HWIs), this chapter has five distinctive sections. The chapter opens with a section on the history of U.S. higher education and its exclusion and inclusion of Black women. The second section provides literature on the intersection of race and gender for Black undergraduate women. The third section explores the literature on the experiences of Black women attending HWIs as undergraduates. The fourth section presents literature on support systems for Black undergraduate women. The last section provides literature on the theoretical framework used to ground this study. With an unwavering commitment to amplifying the voices of Black women, this chapter presents a vital cornerstone for advancing comprehension of the unique challenges, triumphs, and transformative potential inherent in their undergraduate endeavors.

Higher Education: The Beginning

The institution of higher education began in the 1600s (Thelin & Gasman, 2017). Religious groups established the earlier institutions of higher education to train new clergymen for the faith (EducationDynamics, n.d.; Thelin & Gasman, 2017). Early institutions were mostly private colleges founded by individual denominations. From its inception, higher education was restrictive, maintaining an "elite and exclusionary"

(Thelin et al., n.d., p. 2) status by limiting enrollment to white men and denying admission to women and African American people.

The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 set in motion the creation of land-grant institutions, where states received monetary support for the use of land to create programs that supported agriculture, mechanical, and military sciences (Thelin et al., n.d.). Public institutions were a way to open the field of higher education to all, not just the wealthy. As public institutions opened their doors, the population of students enrolled remained relatively unchanged, with white men being the majority enrollee (EducationDynamics, n.d.). The Morrill Act of 1862 saw an increase in the creation of public colleges, specifically in the western states, and most of them accepted women (Kahn, 2020). The Morrill Act of 1890 ushered in institutions of higher education for Black students. This was the beginning of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). This legislation allowed for the creation of several Black colleges, predominantly established in southern states.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, higher education saw expansion in its academic disciplines and the establishment of colleges for women and minorities. Despite these advances, higher education remained heavily populated by upper-class white men (EducationDynamics, n.d.). By the 21st century, the demographic population of historically excluded students attending college began to increase (Zamani, 2003). The increase in enrollment was due to the increase in students from various ethnic, socioeconomic, racial, and sex backgrounds gaining access to higher education (Zamani, 2003).

Women in Higher Education

The collegiate experiences of women vary drastically, partly because those experiences have been shaped by race (Zamani, 2003). When higher education was created in the United States, it was solely for the purpose of educating white men (Thelin & Gasman, 2017). Women were not allowed to attend colleges and universities until the 19th century.

Oberlin College was the first higher education institution to admit Black students in 1835 and then women in 1837 (Commodore et al., 2021). Although admitted, women were not permitted to earn degrees until the 1840s (Zajac, 2022). Mary Patterson was the first Black woman to earn a degree from Oberlin College in 1862 (Commodore et al., 2021). Throughout the 19th century, women saw an increase in access to higher education, especially with the establishment of women-only colleges like Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia (Kahn, 2020).

Enrollment Numbers

The trend of women enrolling in higher education institutions would continue to rise with women having surpassed men in enrollment by the 1980s, a trend that continues to hold true even now (Carlton, 2023).

Overall Numbers. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022) released its annual *Undergraduate Enrollment*, which focused on enrollment numbers between Fall 2009 and Fall 2020. Notably, the COVID-19 global pandemic may have affected the enrollment numbers for Fall 2020. At the time of the report, the verified undergraduate enrollment numbers for Fall 2020 were 15.9 million students compared to 17.5 million in 2009, a decrease of 9% (NCES, 2022). Enrollment numbers were

projected to rebound by about 8% between Fall 2020 and Fall 2030 to 17.1 million students, almost close to the 2009 enrollment numbers (NCES, 2022).

Numbers Based on Sex of Student. Further analysis of the enrollment data showed female students composed up to 58% (9.2 million students) of the total undergraduate enrollment and male students composed up to 42% (6.7 million students; NCES, 2022). Over the previous 10-year period (i.e., 2009–2019), the enrollment trends presented the same for the sexes (i.e., female students enrolling at a higher rate than male students). Interestingly, both male and female student enrollments saw a decrease of 5% (i.e., from 9.9 million to 9.4 million female students and from 7.6 million to 7.1 million male students) over this same period (NCES, 2022). There was also a noticeable change in enrollment based on sex during the first fall of the pandemic. NCES (2022) reported for the fall of 2020, female enrollment was down by 2%, while male enrollment was down by 7%—the largest decline in a single year for male enrollment. There is still hope because NCES projects female enrollment to increase by 6% and male enrollment by 11% between 2020 and 2030.

Undergraduate Enrollment by Race and Ethnicity. The data available varied across racial and ethnic groups between 2009 and 2020. The 15.9 million students enrolled in Fall 2020 can be classified into the following categories: (a) white (8.1 million students), (b) Hispanic (3.3 million students), (c) Black (2.0 million students), (d) Asian (1.1 million students), (e) two or more races (669,000 students), (f) American Indian or Alaska Native (107,300 students), and (g) Pacific Islander (42,500 students). A look at this data showed that between 2009 and 2020, there was a decline in enrollment numbers for many racial and ethnic groups. NCES (2022) reported a decrease of 43% in

American Indian or Alaska Native enrollment (i.e., from 187,600 to 107,300 students), a decrease of 25% in white enrollment (i.e., from 10.9 million to 8.1 million students), and a decrease of 21% in Black enrollment (i.e., from 2.5 million to 2.0 million students). Two groups saw increases or no change at all. Hispanic enrollment increased by 42% (i.e., from 2.4 million to 3.3 million) and the Asian and Pacific Islander enrollment numbers remained the same at 1.1 million (NCES, 2022). Fall 2020 enrollment had lower undergraduate numbers across all racial/ethnic groups than Fall 2009 (NCES, 2022), a possible effect of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Institutions of higher education afford all students the opportunity to learn with each other. As of 2022, women outnumbered men in enrollment at institutions of higher education (Zajac, 2022). For Black women, as enrollment has increased, information about their unique experiences has remained stagnant (Kelly, Gardner, et al., 2021).

Black Women and Higher Education

The relationship between higher education and Black women has seen its difficulties with slavery, segregation, discrimination, and exclusion based on race and gender, impeding their progress toward a better relationship (Commodore et al., 2021). According to Stewart (2017), the experiences of Black women in higher education in the United States showed an "unsettled and conflicted history juxtaposed with an unqualified record of persistence and academic achievement" (p. 31). In addition, Stewart (2017) drew attention to the fact that disparities between Black women and their white counterparts are still significant and ongoing, while the enrollment of Black women into higher education has not been deemed "endangered" (p. 31). Stewart sounded the alarm

that the needs of Black female students need to be supported for them to continue to be successful in U.S. higher education.

Black women have consistently maintained a presence in higher education. Black women recorded an enrollment high of 1.6 million in 2010 (NCES, 2021b). Since then, there has been a recorded decline in enrollment. According to the NCES (2021b), in the fall of 2020, enrollment at institutions of higher education for Black women was approximately 14.2% (1,291,100 students). This number showed a trending decline in Black women students' enrollment from previous years: 2019 (1,314,800 students), 2018 (1,328,700 students), 2017 (1,352,300 students), 2016 (1,376,900 students), and 2015 (1,428,200 students; NCES, 2021b). Similarly, the numbers for white women enrolled saw a decline over the same time while Hispanic and Asian and Pacific Islander women enrollments saw increases. Despite the decrease in enrollment numbers for white women, they still have a higher number of enrollments compared to the remaining women (see Table 1).

Table 1

Level of Enrollment, Sex, and Race/Ethnicity or Nonresident Alien Status of Student

Sex, race/ethnicity, or nonresident alien status	Fall enrollment (in thousands)						
	2010	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Undergraduate, total	18,082.4	17,046.7	16,874.6	16,773.0	16,616.4	16,557.5	15,851.9
Female	10,246.1	9,544.4	9,457.8	9,421.8	9,388.2	9,408.1	9,201.6
White	6,035.0	5,115.7	4,998.6	4,892.7	4,799.2	4,727.6	4,592.9
Black	1,694.2	1,428.2	1,376.9	1,352.3	1,328.7	1,314.8	1,279.1
Hispanic	1,468.1	1,756.7	1,824.9	1,892.0	1,949.6	2,038.0	2,024.5
Asian/Pacific Islander	573.9	569.0	579.7	588.3	601.7	610.3	618.8
Asian	542.4	542.5	554.0	563.3	577.2	585.3	594.3
Pacific Islander	31.5	26.5	25.7	25.0	24.5	25.0	24.5
American Indian/Alaska Native	106.8	79.1	77.1	74.8	72.7	71.4	68.2
Two or more races	171.3	337.9	340.0	356.9	372.7	387.4	395.1
Nonresident alien	196.9	257.9	260.5	264.7	263.5	258.6	222.9

Note. From *Total Fall Enrollment in Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions, by Level of Enrollment, Sex, Attendance Status, and Race/Ethnicity or Nonresident Alien Status of Student: Selected Years, 1976 Through 2020* by National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_306.10.asp?current=yes).

Degree Attainment. NCES (2021a) reported a total of 2,038,431 bachelor's degrees were conferred in the 2019–2020 academic year. This number is an increase from the 2,013,086 bachelor's degrees awarded in the 2018–2019 academic year (NCES, 2021a). A further comparison of the 2 academic years revealed 861,263 (academic year 2019–2020) and 857,607 (academic year 2018–2019) of those degrees were awarded to male students and 1,177,168 (academic year 2019–2020) and 1,155,479 (academic year 2018–2019) were awarded to female students (NCES, 2021a). The top three earners of bachelor's degrees in each academic year were white, Hispanic, and Black students, respectively.

In the 2018–2019 academic year, Black women earned 11.4% of the degrees, compared to 8.8% of Black men and 60.8% of white women (NCES, 2021a). Black women were also outpaced by Hispanic women in degree conferrals, with Hispanic women earning 15.7% in 2018–2019 (NCES, 2021a). Similar numbers were recorded for the 2019–2020 academic year. Black women earned 11.3% of the degrees, compared to 8.7% of Black men, 59.8% of white women, and 16.4% of Hispanic women (NCES, 2021a). All demographics showed a decline in the overall number of bachelor's degrees conferred. These data showed Black women earn degrees at a higher rate than Black men but still fall behind white women and Hispanic women in comparison.

College student success is often equated to the conferring of a degree. However, Winkle-Wagner (2015) cautioned against using such a broad term for success because it could exclude how others perceive and define college success. For some students, success is completing a class, term, or even a year. For Black women, success goes much deeper than the surface level.

Graduation rates are a standard means of measuring academic success. The problem with setting graduation as the standard is that it reduces the metrics by which undergraduate Black women view academic success (Porter & Byrd, 2021). Zamani (2003) believed reducing the definition of success down to metrics and graduation silenced the experiences of Black women, while simultaneously saying they do not need support. Based on the numbers, Black women enroll in and subsequently graduate from college. From an institutional standpoint, this fact is a success. However, information on their experiences and how their intersecting identities (i.e., Black and a woman) impact their success is not factored in. This kind of hypervisibility (i.e., highly noticeable,

frequently due to their race and gender) and invisibility (i.e., feelings of being ignored and overlooked) is common for Black undergraduate women on college campuses, especially at HWIs.

As enrollment numbers continue to increase for Black women in college, institutions must look at their one-size-fits-all approach to student success (Miller, 2017). Kelly, Raines, et al. (2021) pointed out Black women still have quite a distance to cover to move beyond just existing at the borders of higher education. Institutions of higher education must expand their definition of success to include the stories of Black women to aid in their successful development (Porter & Byrd, 2021).

Model Minority

First introduced in 1966 to praise Japanese Americans, the term *model minority* refers to "groups who were at one time marginalized, educationally, economically, and socially, but eventually rose despite their many obstacles to become prosperous, admired, and even emulated" (Kaba, 2008, p. 310). Black women have been successful as a group, despite the historical and contemporary oppression they have experienced (Everett & Croom, 2017). Because of their success, Kaba (2008) positioned them to be the emerging model minority. The increasing enrollment and graduation of Black women increased this association as the model minority (Kaba, 2008; Patton & Croom, 2017; Patton et al., 2016, 2017; Porter & Byrd, 2021). Enrollment and graduation statistics are the two prominent factors Kaba highlighted as evidence that has pointed to Black women's emergence as the model minority.

Black women are making educational gains in higher education. However, there is the question as to whether the success of Black women undergraduates have created

more of a consequence than a cause for celebration (Everett & Croom, 2017). Now that they have shown they are capable of success, institutions are not eager to invest funding to consider how their intersecting identities (i.e., Black and a woman) impact their success (Everett & Croom, 2017). Instead, Black female students continue to report feelings of isolation and discrimination based on their intersecting identities such as race, gender, or class (Everett & Croom, 2017). Understanding Black women's experiences is important to improving their experiences at institutions of higher education.

Double Jeopardy and Dual Burden

Introduced in 1979, Beale used the term *double jeopardy* to illustrate the experience of Black women regarding racism and sexism (Porter & Dean, 2015). Black women often face a dual burden as members of two historically marginalized identity groups, experiencing intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression. As both Black individuals and women, they navigate the intricate intersections of race and gender, confronting unique challenges that result from the compounded effects of systemic racism and sexism.

In predominant cultures like institutions of higher education with their status in two historically marginalized identities, Black women are prone to more stress (Miller, 2017). This double bind manifests in various dimensions of their lives, including education, employment, healthcare, and social interactions. Black women often encounter heightened barriers and limited opportunities as they contend with stereotypes, biases, and societal expectations that perpetuate their marginalization.

This intersectional identity positions Black women at the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination, requiring them to navigate a complex web of oppression while

simultaneously asserting their agency, resilience, and collective strength. Recognizing and understanding this double jeopardy is vital for dismantling systemic inequalities and fostering a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

Campus Environments

Being an undergraduate student who identifies as a Black woman is challenging enough. Existing in spaces that were not traditionally designed for Black women can be troubling and present issues unknown or explored for this population of students. The pressures of being in a white space and being a person of color impact their ability to be successful (Kelly, Raines, et al., 2021). Black women undergraduate students matriculating at HWIs encounter several barriers that could derail them. Black women students reported feelings of isolation, marginalization, and racial battle fatigue at HWIs (Corbin et al., 2018; Donovan & Guillory, 2017; Kelly, Gardner, et al., 2021; Kelly, Raines, et al., 2021; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). These feelings are all forms of microaggressions, which, over time, become mentally exhausting and taxing for Black undergraduate women (Corbin et al., 2018; Donovan & Guillory, 2017).

Undergraduate Black women have come to expect daily microaggression encounters on their campuses. Black women attending HWIs reported psychological stress and difficulty adjusting socially (Donovan & Guillory, 2017; Kelly, Raines, et al., 2021). The intersection of Black women's marginalized identities can further exacerbate the stress experienced by Black students on HWI campuses (Winkle-Wagner, 2015; Zamani, 2003). Black women spend a considerable amount of energy trying to rationalize and make sense of racially motivated microaggressions (Profit et al., 2000). This energy leads to racial battle fatigue.

Racial Battle Fatigue

Racial battle fatigue is the result of constant dealings with microaggressions that eventually take a toll on a person, physically, mentally, or emotionally (Corbin et al., 2018). The internal struggles of people of color with subtle and overt forms of racism is the definition of racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004). Black women attending HWIs are destined to experience racial battle fatigue at some point; most times as they wrestle with defining themselves in the face of microaggressions (Corbin et al., 2018). Two tropes they may find themselves working through include strong Black woman and angry Black woman.

Strong Black Woman

Strong Black woman is a trope Black women sometimes find themselves being labeled. This term refers to the perceived image others have of Black women and the way they handle their business despite all the adversity they face (Corbin et al., 2018). This way of handling business with dignity has come to be both a blessing and a burden (Corbin et al., 2018). For Black undergraduate women, as they continue to achieve success by any means necessary, it may give the impression they are doing well when they may be struggling. Black women's way of holding it all together when things seem like they are falling apart (Haynes, 2019) and their resilience (Porter & Dean, 2015; Winkle-Wagner, 2015) are their strengths but may also impede administrative leaders from realizing they need assistance.

Angry Black Woman

The angry Black woman trope has historical roots going back to the race-gendered stereotypes imposed on Black women by popular media and continuously

perpetuated in culture and media (Corbin et al., 2018). These controlling images or negative stereotypes (Collins, 2000) have long defined Black women as loud talking, irrational, argumentative, aggressive, and assertive (Corbin et al., 2018). Originating during the slave era and perpetuated by popular media, these stereotypes have come to be seen as normal (Collins, 2000; Corbin et al., 2018). The stereotypes lack any real substance and portray simplistic images of Black women (Corbin et al., 2018). Black women find themselves being wedged between gender and race politics, creating an unfavorable archetype, the angry Black woman (Corbin et al., 2018). Black undergraduate women at HWIs who venture to speak up are labeled angry Black women and censored (Corbin et al., 2018). This censorship fosters the act of silencing their voices.

State of Black Women's College Success

Even with an all-time high enrollment of Black undergraduate students, Black women continue to be an underrepresented group in higher education (Storlie et al., 2018) and graduate at a lower rate than white and Asian female students (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). With the increase in college participation, the parity in college completion suggests there are barriers for Black women to overcome (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Research on Black women undergraduate students, although limited in nature, has focused mostly on what the student lacks in terms of being able to succeed (Haynes, 2019). This deficit perspective shifts the responsibility of institutional support to victimizing the student (Haynes, 2019; Winkle-Wagner, 2015).

Success is defined and perceived differently by undergraduate Black women. Porter and Byrd (2021) asserted Black women's definition of success is much richer and

based on individual experiences and development as opposed to standardized assessment metrics. Research is lacking that speaks to how Black women's undergraduate experiences may be racialized and gendered (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Unfortunately, higher education operates from a one-size-fits-all perspective that has yet to find ways to support the academic success of Black women undergraduates.

Although research is beginning to emerge that speaks to the negative experiences of Black women at HWIs, the missing piece of literature is the support and attention this population of students need to thrive and persist on these campuses (Shaw, 2017). Ignoring the marginalization of Black women and attributing their success and retention to their innate strength is problematic because it relieves the responsibility of institutions to provide the necessary support for this population (Patton & Croom, 2017). More institutional awareness and support are needed.

Persistence

The experiences of undergraduate Black women present many challenges for them as they persist to graduation. Most research on academic achievement has focused on the deficits of Black women, blaming their lack of achievement on poor academic training (Haynes, 2019). Seeing the academy beginning to focus on Black women and their success is refreshing; however, it is also problematic that studies are blaming the students versus exploring how institutions can provide support (Haynes, 2019).

Resilience is key in Black women's quest to reach their accomplishments (Porter & Dean, 2015; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Institutions are urged to understand the dynamics (i.e., the experiences of Black women) at play when seeking solutions to aid in the academic success of Black women (West et al., 2016). The number of Black women

pursuing an undergraduate degree has increased over the years; however, they still must navigate an unwelcoming environment.

Support

In the hallowed halls of HWIs, a diverse group of aspiring scholars converges, each with a unique journey, and an unyielding determination to carve out their place in academia. For undergraduate Black women, this journey takes on a distinct perspective, often shaped by a quest for support that transcends the boundaries of traditional academic structures. The pursuit of higher education at HWIs offers unparalleled opportunities, but also presents a range of challenges. Areas of support for undergraduate Black women include (a) peer networks, (b) mentorship, (c) institutional resources, (d) cultural centers, and (e) well-being services.

Peer Networks

Many Black undergraduate women at HWIs seek solace and understanding in peer networks. These groups serve as a communication venue for students to share information and resources (Dee & Daly, 2012). These networks provide a space where shared experiences foster empathy, validate challenges, and offer emotional support. Lack of representation can sometimes lead to feelings of isolation, making these peer connections vital for their sense of belonging and emotional well-being.

Mentorship

Positive faculty interactions and mentorship play a pivotal role in the support landscape. Engaging in mentoring opportunities with faculty and staff can be essential to student success, especially for students of color and women (Commodore et al., 2021). Encounters with faculty who are culturally sensitive, provide guidance, and serve as role

models can significantly impact a college student's academic journey. Conversely, the absence of relatable faculty or mentors can lead to a sense of disconnection and hinder a college student's pursuit of academic and personal growth. Commodore et al. (2021) highlighted lack of representation as a common barrier in finding a mentor for Black women in higher education.

Institutional Resources

HWIs may offer a range of support services, but their accessibility and cultural relevance vary. According to Winkle-Wagner (2015), formal institutional support programs that have a racial or ethnic focus is important to the success of Black students. Counseling services, academic advising, and tutoring programs should be equipped to address the specific needs of Black undergraduate women. A lack of tailored resources can perpetuate a sense of being overlooked and underserved.

Cultural Centers

Researchers have suggested organizational and physical spaces such as Black cultural centers are important to providing a safe and welcoming space for Black students at HWIs (Porter, 2017). Having spaces that celebrate their heritage, culture, and experiences can be empowering. Cultural centers and affinity groups can offer a sense of belonging, opportunities for leadership, and spaces to celebrate identity. The absence or underfunding of such spaces can deprive Black undergraduate women of vital avenues for personal growth and community engagement.

Well-Being Services

The pressures of being a minority in predominantly white environments can lead to heightened stress and mental health challenges (Commodore et al., 2021). Adequate

mental health services that are culturally competent and stigma free are crucial. The lack of tailored mental health support can exacerbate the burden of navigating both racial and academic challenges.

Support for Black undergraduate women at HWIs is multifaceted and touches upon various aspects of their academic, emotional, and cultural experiences. Support must recognize the intersectionality of the identities these women possess. Challenges related to being both a woman and a racial minority can be compounded, requiring a nuanced approach to support that addresses their multifaceted experiences. A lack of tailored support can contribute to a sense of isolation, hinder academic success, and perpetuate inequities. On the other hand, holistic and culturally relevant support structures can foster a thriving, empowered, and inclusive educational environment.

Black Feminism

Birthed out of two key movements in African American history, one being the abolitionist movement and the other being the civil rights movement, Black feminism empowered women to bring awareness to the social, political, and economic issues plaguing the African American community and specifically, Black women (U. Y. Taylor, 1998). Energized by their experiences with how systems of power were designed to maintain the socially constructed categories of race and gender, Black women were coming together to use their collective voices to the issues they faced daily (Collins, 2000; U. Y. Taylor, 1998). They were caught between being Black and being a woman with no support from their racial community nor their gender community because neither entity was willing to lend their voice to the causes Black women were fighting for (Collins, 1986; U. Y. Taylor, 1998).

Black Feminist Organization

By 1973, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) was founded to address the concerns and challenges facing Black women (Wada, 2008). Fueled by their alienation from the civil rights movement and discrimination from the feminist movement, Black women came together to create an organization that would center their identities (Wada, 2008). The key focus of NBFO was to raise the visibility of women in both movements and target the negative images of Black women (Lewis, 2021). Left out of this conversation were the issues impacting Black lesbians and other challenges Black women faced. This exclusion led to the creation of the Combahee River Collective, which focused on bringing attention to the economic and sexuality issues lacking in the initial NBFO creation (Lewis, 2021). Even though neither group was long lived, they provided the infrastructure needed to keep the dialogue going about Black feminism and the need to view the power structures that impact the lives of Black women.

Goals and Concerns of Black Feminism

Black feminism had one goal: seeking to preserve what society had little regard for, Black women (U. Y. Taylor, 1998). However, Black women realized this movement was much bigger than them. They sought to eradicate or shed attention on the issues impacting women around the world. Their main goals were (a) the economic status of women, (b) political rights, (c) social rights, and (d) health rights (Collins, 1986). Women's basic right to education, protection from violence, right to marry, and basic health care were under siege and Black women were experiencing the effects at a higher rate than most other women and men in society (Collins, 1986). Black women realized these issues were not just pertinent to them in the United States; this was a global issue.

Black women's struggles are not new. Their struggles come down to classism, racism, and sexism in which for Black women, they cannot separate their identities, receiving double the dose of the isms (Collins, 2000). Many Black women scholars understood the complex interplay their multiple identities played in their historical oppression and how that impacted their daily lives. Sadly, this continues to manifest in the lives of Black undergraduate women at HWIs. They still fight to be seen, heard, validated, and accepted.

Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought (BFT) focuses on understanding the experiences of Black women about their lives at the intersection of their race, gender, and class (Collins, 1986, 2000). Collins (2000) believed Black women's lived experiences provided knowledge, pushed against the standard tradition of ways of knowing as the only means of knowing, questioned what was considered data (i.e., believing things like Black women's poetry or writings were data), and believed higher education was fundamentally flawed by not considering the works of Black women in the academy. Collins (2000) insisted alternative epistemologies were needed for research and academic work to be inclusive and foster the voices of all. She created BFT as a form of empowerment for Black women to resist oppression.

Distinguishing Factors of BFT

Collins (2000) believed the oppressor could not offer insights into how oppression was hurting the oppressed. She believed to get a true sense of how oppressive forces impact others, you had to ask the person experiencing it; hence, a Black woman's experience would provide a much richer understanding of what was going on. To

illustrate this understanding, Collins offered six distinguishing key points of BFT. First, the oppressive intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality of Black women shape their experiences. Those experiences inform their consciousness or way of knowing. This group knowledge was labeled Black women's standpoint. The second feature focused on the point that no two Black women's experiences are the same. Although they may share commonalities, their experiences will be different based on their social location of race, gender, sexuality, or class. Black women are not a monolith!

The third feature focused on Black feminism as a critical social theory. As a critical social theory, BFT provides Black women with the tools to resist intersecting oppressions (Collins, 2000). In actively resisting, BFT helps to eradicate social and economic injustices Black women experience. The fourth feature of BFT highlights the fact that in their everyday lives, Black women construct knowledge in the pursuit of self-definition. As they encounter oppression and resistance, they gain knowledge from that experience that serves to empower them.

The fifth feature deals with the dynamic nature of BFT. Due to the suppression of Black women and the controlling images imposed on them from the dominant society, Black women have had to create alternative spaces in which to actively resist the social conditions designed to negatively affect them (Collins, 2000), which is an ongoing response to oppression. Lastly, the sixth feature highlights the collective perspective of BFT. Collins's (2000) Black feminism sought unity. As such, the struggles of Black women are interconnected with other marginalized people. If Black women are empowered, then all people will be empowered. Collins emphasized that although these

features may share similarities with other bodies of knowledge, the focus should be on the convergence of these features as they shape BFT.

Levels of Oppression

Collins (2000) asserted the oppression of Black women is contained in three interdependent levels designed to keep Black at the margins. The levels of oppression are linked to economy, politics, and ideology. First, the economic dimension of oppression is linked to the exploitation of Black women's labor, which has been, and continues to be, the backbone of U.S. capitalism. In limiting their occupational options, Black women were forced into survival mode, diminishing opportunities for them to pursue other options that were less service oriented and laborious. In the end, it became a survival of the fittest and a never-ending cycle of poverty; as the society they worked for profited, they continued to struggle.

The second level of oppression is rooted in politics. Black women were denied basic rights and privileges afforded to white male citizens (Collins, 2000). Denying the right to vote, opportunities to hold public offices, and undue process of law all perpetuated the political subordination of Black women. Collins (2000) went on to call out how education has also played a pivotal role in the political subordination of Black women by denying literacy and underfunding and segregating schools. By controlling their access to quality education, they were controlling their ability for upward growth.

Lastly, the ideological dimension focuses on the controlling images used to oppress Black women. Having historical roots in slavery, the images associated with Black women have become the norm and are used to justify their oppression (Collins, 2000). Images like mammies, hypersexualized women, and welfare recipients have

permeated society and how they view Black women. These types of negative stereotypes have been instrumental in the oppression of Black women (Collins, 2000).

Collectively, these levels of oppression have been highly effective. The social control they exert on Black women is designed to keep them in a subordinate place (Collins, 2000). It is these interlocking systems that Collins (1986, 2000) urged Black women intellectuals to push back against. Collins argued it was this system of oppression that suppressed the ideas of Black intellectuals and protected White male interests and worldviews. She further outlined three patterns of suppression that drive feminist thought: (a) omission (i.e., universal theories meant to apply to all women have the white, middle-class woman as the prototype), (b) lack of diversity (i.e., there is an acknowledgment of the need to diversify research, but no action), and (c) symbolic inclusion (i.e., acceptance of the work of Black women but not allowing Black women themselves to be present). These forms of oppression highlight how Black women continue to operate in the margins of higher education. These phenomena could significantly impact the experiences of Black undergraduate women on college campuses.

Outsider Within

The term *outsider within* was presented by Collins (1986, 2000) to bring awareness to Black women's struggles against oppression. According to Collins (2000), this concept ties back to women as domestic workers and housekeepers (i.e., a form of economic oppression). Although they were welcomed in the home as workers, they were not a part of the family (i.e., they did not belong), resulting in the term outsider within. Working as domestics provided them with a unique vantage point. This outsider within

concept allowed them to have an up close and personal view of the "contradictions between dominant groups' actions and ideologies" (Collins, 2000, p. 11). This experience created a unique Black women's standpoint on self and society. They were able to gain new perspectives on oppression and pass those experiences (i.e., information) along to other Black women.

In this study, I used BFT to center the experiences of Black undergraduate women attending HWIs. BFT provided the critical lens through which to study these experiences. The term outsider within is a perfect way to illustrate intersectionality and marginality. As Black women students, they are invited to the institution, but based on their experiences and interactions, do not feel as if they belong.

BFT and Intersectionality

The literature on Black women undergraduate students is often conducted from a racial or gendered perspective, and only more recently from an intersectional lens (Kelly, Gardner, et al., 2021). *Intersectionality* is a term coined by Crenshaw (1989) in which she implored people to look at how power and privilege impact identities. Crenshaw believed certain identities have more or less power and privilege and that it was important to explore how that power and privilege impact the lives of those identities. She intended intersectionality to be used as a lens to explore the way power intersects and collides with people's social identities (Columbia Law School, 2017). Some people are subjected to all inequalities such as race, gender, class, or sexuality (Steinmetz, 2020).

Crenshaw implored people to not look at the sum of the parts, but the whole impact of how systemic structures of power either provide access or limitations depending on how one falls in social identities (Steinmetz, 2020). B. Taylor (2019)

declared all oppression is linked and the need to realize that discrimination and oppression are experienced differently. No two people will have the same experiences. Higher education professionals need to consider all the identities Black women hold and the systematic oppression they have experienced when seeking solutions to their ability to be academically successful. When addressing issues of inequality, Crenshaw (1991) and Collins (2000) stressed identities cannot be separated. To do so would be rejecting the experiences of other identities. This idea supports the ever-important point, that Black women's identities are intertwined.

Collins (2000) stressed the identities of Black women cannot be understood as singular nor without the context of how racism and sexism have impacted them. Because of the intricacies of Black women's identities, intersectionality is a tool to explore and examine the relationships between their oppressed and marginalized identities (Porter & Byrd, 2021). However, it is important to note intersectionality's strengths and limits. According to Jones and Abes (2013), intersectionality is great for situating identity in lived experiences, but it does tend to hyperfocus on one identity, leaving other nonsalient identities' impact on experiences to be less explored. Being conscious of all identities— privileged and oppressed—and their influence on experiences is important for analysis.

Students' intersecting identities influence how they experience a college campus (Museus et al., 2019). Black women can identify with at least two marginalized identities. How they experience the campus is different and unique to everyone. Intersectionality allows scholars to examine critically how multiple intersecting identities have historically affected the experience of an individual or a particular group (Kelly, Gardner, et al., 2021). Understanding the impact of power structures on the multiple identities a Black

woman possesses is important to institutions being able to offer them support for persistence and graduation. When choosing to address racial inequalities, people must apply a gender lens, and if addressing gender inequalities, must apply the racial lens (Steinmetz, 2020). Institutions of higher education wanting to review policies for women must look at how race impacts those policies. The same rule applies when looking at policies based on race. The impact on gender should be considered. To understand the impact of intersectionality in the lives of marginalized and oppressed populations better, especially for Black women, Crenshaw (1991) outlined three levels in which intersectionality operated that would provide a greater meaning of its intricacies.

Dimensions of Intersectionality

Crenshaw (1991) explained the experiences of Black women cannot be confined to the traditional ideals of racism and sexism. She provided an additional perspective in which to analyze the way race and gender intersect at structural, political, and representational levels to impact the lives of Black women.

Structural

Structural intersectionality focuses on how power structures and systemic oppression influence the experiences of marginalized people (Porter & Byrd, 2021). For instance, by studying the experiences of Black undergraduate women at HWIs, the current study aimed to highlight how their experiences as (a) Black and (b) women were impacted based on the traditional measures of academic success. Black women's experiences are not accounted for when assessing metrics of success. Thus, when compared to others, they either seem lacking (e.g., white women) or succeeding (e.g.,

Black men). However, their marginalized identities call for a deeper look into their experiences because they are not like others.

Political

Political intersectionality focuses on how policies and procedures position one identity over the other (Porter & Byrd, 2021). Creating policies and procedures that favors one identity over another goes back to the single-axis conversation Collins (2000) mentioned. In the instances of Black women, they are either Black or a woman, but hardly ever researched as a Black woman. By denying or failing to acknowledge them as complete people (Porter & Byrd, 2021), they are continuing to be oppressed and marginalized in higher education. As Crenshaw (1991) stated, Black women are positioned between at least two subordinate groups that have opposing agendas. Addressing the concerns of one would be at the expense of the other. Institutions of higher education either choose to implement programs for either women or Black students, failing to realize the need to focus on both gender and race to support the academic success of Black women.

Representational

Lastly, representational intersectionality highlights the negative stereotypes society places on Black women and their inability to push back against them for fear of further marginalization (Porter & Byrd, 2021). Collins (2000) also discussed the sensationalizing of Black women in images like mammy or welfare recipients. Crenshaw (1991) brought attention to the devaluation of Black women and how culture has created an unfair and unpleasant image of the Black woman. Black undergraduate women are often categorized as strong Black women because of their ability to persevere (Haynes,

2019; Porter & Byrd, 2021; Winkle-Wagner, 2015) or an angry Black woman (Corbin et al., 2018) because of their outspoken behavior. Either way, society has created an image of Black women and when they operate outside of them, it causes discord.

Epistemological Viewpoint

This research study centered gender and race of the voices of an oppressed population of people—Black women. By engaging in research with Black women who attended an HWI as an undergraduate, I positioned myself "side by side with the less powerful in a joint effort to bring about social transformation" (Mertens, 2021, p. 19). In choosing to study race and gender as it impacts a marginalized population, I quickly realized the predominant research paradigms did not fit this study. Thus, I was forced to look for a paradigm that closely aligned with the topic of study.

I wanted an epistemological framework that would best capture the essence of the promising work the study would reveal. Confronting social oppression (Mertens, 2021) of undergraduate Black women led me to consider the transformative paradigm initially. The use of the transformative paradigm allows for a critical look at the resources available and used to support the experiences of undergraduate Black women at an HWI and a look at intersectionality regarding the intersection of race and gender and its impact on their experiences. However, I purposed to do more than just confront social oppression or fix a problem. I wanted to make sure the voices of this historically marginalized population are truly heard, and their experiences and stories are properly valued. This need led me to use the work of Dr. Dillard (2000, 2006) and endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE) to guide my research design.

EFE

Dillard and other Black feminists believed it was not necessary to disassociate oneself from the research, arguing it was the exact opposite for Black women (Dillard, 2000, 2006). Collins (2000) and Dillard (2000, 2006) valued the life knowledge, or experiences researchers and participants bring to a study. EFE presented an opportunity to challenge the Western concepts of knowledge while allowing me to underpin my study with Black woman's ways of knowing (Dillard, 2000, 2006). Dillard was deliberate in choosing the term *endarkened* to express her feminist insights. Dillard used the term endarkened to bring into focus the historical grounding of BFT. BFT forces people to look at the intersections of culture and historical oppression as to what is known. For Dillard, to understand the lives of Black women, people had to understand all these women go through in their daily lives.

For too long, the white male knowledge of reality has been used as a universal way to describe all reality and Dillard (2000) proposed this epistemology as a call to "resituate our research endeavors in their cultural and historical contexts, to reclaim their personal and social roots or origins" (pp. 671–672). Dillard was calling for research that considered the historical and cultural perspectives of the participants being studied. To do this meant using an alternative epistemology to the traditional ones accepted by academic scholars. I sought an epistemology that honored the research and supported the knowledge of the participants engaged in the study. EFE was appropriate for this study because it allowed me to move away from the concept of the researcher as the knower and the participants as the people to be known and toward an opportunity to build relationships and treat research as a responsibility (Dillard, 2000, 2006).

Dillard (2016) wrote of moving away from the notion of wanting to fix a problem in research to "centering reciprocity and relationship between the researcher and those who, at that moment is engaged in the research with us" (p. 407). In this sense, research becomes a responsibility for the researcher, and they are obligated to respect and care for the community in which they are engaged in research (Dillard, 2000, 2006). My wish to do more than confront social oppression was led by my sense of duty to make sure undergraduate Black women would be seen as much more than to be known. There was a sacredness I wanted to protect and nurture the participants who engaged in the research process. The following sections list the six assumptions of EFE that undergirded my research.

Assumption 1: Self-Definition Forms One's Participation and Responsibility to One's Community

This first assumption implored me to be responsible for the people and the culture in the research I was conducting (Dillard, 2000, 2006). For this study, the participants were Black women and their culture. Collins (2000) stated not all Black women have the same experiences. Keeping this in mind, as a Black woman, I had to be sure of who I was as a person in this community and culture. Defining who I was helped me to understand, respect, and not overpower the participants of the study. As a higher education professional, I am constantly encountering students who share their experiences with me regarding collegiate life. I realized the relationship I developed with many of my potential research participants was essential. I prioritized making sure I did not view myself as the knower and the participants as the known (Dillard, 2000, 2006), but allowed their voices to take center stage.

Assumption 2: Research Is Both an Intellectual and Spiritual Pursuit of Purpose

In this assumption, Dillard (2000, 2006) acknowledged research is the pursuit of knowledge. She also implored people engaged in research to honor the value, reverence the process, and protect those with whom you are engaged in research (Dillard, 2000, 2006). Research for and by Black women should not be viewed as just an intellectual endeavor. For the work to truly be transformative, Dillard (2000, 2006) urged researchers to understand the context and connection to the people being studied because doing so would truly empower the work being conducted. EFE allowed me and the participants to truly be ourselves. The participants and I were able to let go and be ourselves, affirming and comforting one another as the participants and I shared dialogue and sought answers to the topics beings explored. For me, to engage in this research as strictly an intellectual process would have been a dishonor to the culture of Black women and their spirituality.

Assumption 3: Only in the Context of Community Does the Individual Appear and, Through Dialogue, Continue to Become

This assumption highlighted the importance communication or language plays in research. Communication is needed not only for conducting research but also for assessing data (Dillard, 2000, 2006). Through dialogue, there is a bonded connection to one another, encouraging relational exchanges, unearthing a sacred vulnerability, and speaking power to truth. Dillard (2006) asserted there is value in telling and in being connected. This idea lent well to the use of sista circles as a means of collecting data because sista circles rely heavily on coming together and sharing dialogue (L. S. Johnson, 2015).

Assumption 4: Concrete Experiences in Everyday Life Form the Criterion of Meaning, the "Matrix of Meaning Making"

Everyday experiences provide a rich backdrop for understanding life (Dillard, 2000, 2006). They provide Black women with the opportunities to explore and form ideas about what we know. Using those experiences furthers the meaning of what life is like for Black women. Collins (2000) provided two aspects of knowing that Dillard drew upon for this assumption: knowledge and wisdom. Collins (2000) wrote:

> Women of color cannot afford to be fools of any type, for our objectification as the Other denies us the protection that white skin, maleness, and wealth confer. This distinction between knowledge and wisdom, and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them, has been key to [our] survival. In the context of race, gender, and class oppression, the distinction is essential. Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate. (p. 208)

Black women lack the luxury of not knowing because not knowing could be the difference between life and death in most cases. Collins (2000) made clear that for Black women to survive, they had to know the difference between knowledge and wisdom, which was their lived experiences (i.e., their everyday lives).

Assumption 5: Knowing and Research Extend Both Historically in Time and Outward to the World

This assumption highlighted the need to frame research for and by Black women in terms of its historical and cultural roots. This assumption means acknowledging the trauma inflicted upon Black women due to the impact of transnational slavery, where

they were taken from their culture and forced into servanthood. The voices of Black

women have been silenced, marginalized, distorted, and in some cases erased. Higher

education's system of knowledge production has historically ignored the contributions of

women of color when it comes to the rules that guide formal educational research

(Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2000, 2006). EFE works to acknowledge this absence while

simultaneously also working to make sure those voices are heard and a part of the process

going forward (Dillard, 2000, 2006). EFE invites this perspective into the research

process and works to honor how Black women's existence is shaped and establishes the

need for the researcher to own the responsibility of care for participants during the

research process. This assumption spoke to the essence of the study, given that it asks

Black women to think about their experiences, uncovering past traumas, to hopefully lead

to understanding and freedom for their future.

Assumption 6: Power Relations Structure Gender, Race, and Other Identity Relations in Research

This assumption links to Crenshaw's work on intersectionality. Crenshaw (1989)

urged others to consider how oppressive systems impact those with marginalized

identities. Dillard (2000, 2006) pointed out these experiences create unique viewpoints

for the population experiencing it, such as undergraduate Black women at HWIs. To try

to separate those experiences from who they are is impossible. I chose to center this study

on race and gender as I explored the lives of the Black women navigating the campuses

of HWIs.

Given this understanding of EFE, I was prepared to take on this sacred work. This

study did not follow traditional research designs in that it relied on the knowledge of the

Black women as truth. I also embraced alternative means of gathering data (i.e., using language as instrumentation). This sacred praxis allowed me to add historical, cultural, and spiritual components to the study and treat the work with the reverence Dillard (2000, 2006) required of research in pursuit of educational inquiry.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I highlighted the relationship between Black women and higher education. I detailed how access to higher education has increased, allowing enrollment numbers for Black women to increase; however, their experiences have been ignored while the focus has been on enrollment and graduation. I provided information on common support systems used. Also included in the literature review was an introduction to Black feminism and BFT to highlight the struggles Black women and women of color have been working toward eliminating. Included as part of the review of BFT was intersectionality and its impact on how Black women show up in spaces. Lastly, I concluded this chapter with a discussion of the six main assumptions of EFE and outlined how it was used as my epistemological viewpoint for this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Women and girls can do whatever they want. There is no limit to what we as

women can accomplish.

—Michelle Obama, *Let Girl's Learn* Event, March 8, 2016

This chapter of the dissertation details the methodology of the research study. For

this qualitative study, I used sista circles, a form of narrative inquiry, to address the

undergraduate experiences of Black women who attend(ed) historically white institutions

(HWIs) and their support to persist. In this section, I provide an explanation for the

selection of sista circles as the methodology chosen. Additionally, I provide details about

how Black feminist thought (BFT) and endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE) were

prevalent in participant selection, recruitment, data collection, and analysis. The chapter

ends with a discussion on how I ensured the authenticity of the study, including my

positionality statement and a summary of the chapter.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the experiences of Black

women who attended HWIs as undergraduates. The participants' stories of their

experiences, both successes and struggles, and perceived support, are what I used to tell

their stories. Additionally, I used a critical analytic frame along with sista circle

methodology to center the voices of the Black women and provide them a space to tell

their stories of when they were undergraduates. The following research questions guided

this study:

1. How do Black women describe their undergraduate experiences at a
   historically white institution?

2. How do Black women describe the support they received as undergraduates
   at a historically white institution?

Research Paradigm

There are many ways of knowing, whether from formal training or life lessons.
Validation of lived experiences is just as important (Collins, 2000). For this study, EFE
was used as the paradigmatic framework. Dillard (2008) stated, "Honoring a long
theoretical tradition of Black feminist thought, endarkened epistemology attempts to
examine the nature of Black women's knowing and the patterns of epistemology that
undergird it" (p. 278). Dillard (2008) placed spirituality at the "center of the thought and
discourse" (p. 278). In using EFE as the paradigmatic framework to guide this research
study, I aimed to show respect and honor to the participants. The core components of
EFE—spirituality, community, and praxis (Dillard, 2008)—supported ethics of care,
value and respect of participants experiences, and a responsibility of the researcher to the
participants.

Axiology, in the lens of EFE, examines the values and ethical considerations
inherent in knowledge production and the pursuit of understanding. *Axiology*
acknowledges the interconnectedness of knowledge and power, recognizing that
dominant systems of knowledge often reflect and perpetuate oppressive hierarchies
(Creswell & Poth, 2016; Mertens, 2021). EFE challenges the Eurocentric, patriarchal, and
colonial values embedded in traditional epistemologies, advocating for the inclusion of
marginalized perspectives and knowledge systems. In the framework of EFE, *ontology*

explores the nature of reality and existence, particularly as it relates to marginalized

groups and their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Mertens, 2021). EFE challenges

dominant ontological assumptions that prioritize a singular, universal truth and highlights

the existence of multiple and diverse realities instead. EFE recognizes the ways in which

intersecting systems of oppression shape and define the experiences of marginalized

communities, emphasizing the importance of incorporating these perspectives into the

understanding of reality. Lastly, *epistemology*, in the framework of EFE, examines the

nature, sources, and validation of knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Mertens, 2021).

EFE seeks to challenge and deconstruct these exclusions by centering the experiences and

knowledge of people who have been historically marginalized. The framework

emphasizes the importance of embodied, situated knowledge and recognizes knowledge

is not neutral but is influenced by power dynamics, social locations, and historical

contexts. This lens highlights the value of storytelling, lived experiences, and community

knowledge as valid sources of knowledge production. EFE encourages a critical

examination of the ways in which dominant systems of knowledge have perpetuated

inequality and advocates for the development of more inclusive and transformative ways

of knowing.

     In choosing to study race and gender as it impacts a marginalized population, I

wanted an epistemological framework that would best capture the essence of the

promising work the study would reveal. Confronting social oppression (Mertens, 2021)

of undergraduate Black women led me to initially consider the transformative paradigm.

The use of EFE allows for a critical look at the resources available and used to support

the experiences of Black women at an HWI. Using EFE also allows for a look at

intersectionality regarding the intersection of race and gender and its impact on their experiences. However, I purposed to do more than just confront social oppression or fix a problem. I wanted to make sure the voices of this historically marginalized population were truly heard, and their experiences and stories were properly valued. This desire led me to use the work of Dillard (2000) and EFE to guide my research design.

Research Design

Dillard (2000) explained educational inquiry is generated from personal and cultural beliefs. Deciding to study the lived experiences of Black women at an HWI is a personal choice. This qualitative study explored their lived experiences using sista circles. Qualitative studies involve the researcher becoming a part of the study while observing the participants in their natural settings. Qualitative research is exploratory, choosing to examine human choice and behavior as it occurs naturally in which the researcher is the primary data collection instrument (B. Johnson & Christensen, 2016).

Sista Circle Methodology

Qualitative research can be conducted in many ways. For this study, I chose to use the sista circle methodology. Sista circles is a methodology created by L. S. Johnson (2015). According to L. S. Johnson (2015), "Sista circles are both a qualitative methodology as well as a support group to examine the lived experiences of Black women" (p. 43). Her creation of sista circles as a methodology aligns with Dillard's (2000, 2006) EFE in using dialogue as a means of data collection. Sista circles incorporates the history and culture of the research participants while also honoring the power of connections among the participants under study (L. S. Johnson, 2015).

Attributes of Sista Circles

L. S. Johnson (2015) defined sista circles as "group discussions or conversations among Black women arranged by a researcher to examine a specific set of topics and/or experiences" (p. 45). With language and dialogue being the center of Sista circles functionality, it embodied the essence of Dillard's (2000, 2006) statement on the use of language as a tool of instrumentality when conducting an educational inquiry. L. S. Johnson pointed out sista circles are not focus groups whose primary purpose is to acquire information from the participants. Dillard and L. S. Johnson used language and dialogue to empower and support participants, not just use them for information gathering. The three elements that made sista circle appropriate for this study and compatible with EFE were (a) communication dynamics, (b) the centrality of empowerment, and (c) the researcher as a participant.

Communication Dynamics. Dialogue implies a reciprocal interaction between two or more people (Dillard, 2000, 2006). Sista circles provide the space for this to occur. In these settings, there is a unique style of communication at play, both verbal and nonverbal. This constant flow of language between Black women can take on Mainstream English Vernacular and Black English Vernacular, seamlessly (Dorsey, 2000). This communication style is due to the comfortable nature of Black women in the presence of one another, supporting and empowering each other. Campbell (1986) suggested the conversation of Black women was worthy of analysis.

Space matters (L. S. Johnson, 2015). The space must be safe and exclusive (Collins, 1986) for Black women to engage in dialogue with one another in a manner that they feel validated, supported, and most importantly, safe to be their authentic selves.

Knowing this information, I used a space that provided a nurturing environment for the participants.

      Centrality of Empowerment. The second attribute of the sista circle methodology is the centrality of empowerment. L. S. Johnson (2015) envisioned sista circles as a space for Black women to encourage and support each other. In BFT, Collins (2000) viewed empowerment as an essential piece to reaching self-actualization. Sista circles provide an environment in which Black women are given the space to assert their self-definition and independence (Collins, 2000). Through EFE, the Black women involved in the sista circles can "resist and challenge entrenched ways of thinking" (Dillard, 2000, p. 675). In harnessing their newfound sense of empowerment, they were able to reenvision themselves and their lives.

      Researcher as Participant. The last attribute of the sista circle methodology is the researcher as a participant and focuses on the role of the researcher and the researcher's connection to the participants. Dillard's (2000, 2006) EFE denounced the detachment of the researcher from the participants, as is commonly done in traditional educational inquiry. EFE supports the researcher in becoming a part of the research process and sharing their experiences and knowledge along the way (Dillard, 2000, 2006). This sharing creates a more reciprocal relationship in that the researcher is not solely taking in the process, but sharing, giving, receiving, and creating a transformative relationship and balance of power in the educational inquiry (Dillard, 2000, 2006; L. S. Johnson, 2015).

      As the researcher, I became a part of the sharing process in this educational inquiry. This inclusion of myself in the research process honored EFE in that I moved

away from receiving information (i.e., a traditional means of research) to imparting and sharing my knowledge (Dillard, 2000, 2006).

Sampling and Recruitment

It was important my sampling remained true to BFT, EFE, and sista circle methodology. To find participants, I used a variety of sampling techniques including reputational and criterion sampling. Reputational sampling relies on the relationships formed to aid in obtaining the desired sample population (Roulston, 2010). For this study, I recruited eight Black women to participate.

To distribute the call for participants (see Appendix A), I relied on the relationships I had formed with faculty, staff, and students by asking select offices at State University to distribute the flyer. Additionally, the call for participants was shared through electronic means such as a posting on social media sites. These methods used reputational sampling to gain access to the targeted population of students needed for the study (Roulston, 2010).

To identify participants, I used the criterion sampling method (Jones et al., 2022). Thus, the participants had to meet the criterion I selected for participation in the study. The inclusion criteria for participants were they had to have (a) identified as Black/African ascendant, (b) identified as a woman, (c) attended an HWI as an undergraduate, and (d) been at least 18 years of age.

A recruitment flyer (see Appendix B) directed participants to complete the Qualtrics-based consent form (see Appendix C) and criteria survey (see Appendix D). My university email was shared so interested parties desiring additional information about the study could contact me. Through a Qualtrics form, interested participants were

able to access detailed information about the study's purpose, inclusion criteria, and consent to participate and be audio and video recorded. Participants were asked to include demographic information such as age, nationality, classification as an undergraduate or graduate student, and undergraduate academic major.

Based on the Qualtrics survey and criterion sampling answers, potential participants were contacted and informed of their qualifications to continue in the survey via confirmation email. The potential participants were then provided with more information about sista circles. I renamed the participants sista scholars to reflect the assumptions of EFE and to foster a reciprocal and engaging environment.

Data Collection

Sista circles were the primary method of data collection. The goal of the sista circle was to create a safe and supportive environment where the sista scholars were inclined to share their stories and collectively construct the meaning of their lived experiences as Black women who attended HWIs as undergraduates. The sista circle lasted 60–90 minutes, and I hosted two sista circle meetings. The sista circle was hosted at a location on campus that allowed for anonymity and provided a safe and nurturing environment. Food was provided to simulate family dinners and encourage casual conversations with friends. The sista circles were recorded using Zoom. Recording the sessions via Zoom provided me the opportunity to ensure I was attributing the statements of the sista scholars to the proper participant. Using Zoom was a means to guarantee authenticity.

Each sista circle had a central theme. The sista circle's themes focused on the two research questions. The first sista circle focused on the experiences of Black women as

undergraduate students at HWIs (see Appendix E). The second sista circle focused on support (see Appendix F). In the first session, the sista scholars were reminded of the purpose of the study and each sista scholar introduced themselves. I began recording the sessions after introductions. The last 15–20 minutes of the sista circles were used for reflective thinking and to discuss the sista circle methodology. After concluding the sista circles, I sent the sista scholars a thank you message for participating in the study (see Appendix G).

Data Analysis

After the conclusion of the sista circles, I downloaded the transcripts from the Zoom recordings to analyze the data. I used narrative analysis for the purposes of this study. *Narrative analysis* is a qualitative analysis method focused on interpreting individual human experiences (Clandinin, 2013). This type of analysis looks to explain the beliefs and views of the sista scholars. Clandinin (2013) wrote narrative analysis "begins and ends with a respect for ordinary lived experiences" (p. 18). This idea aligns with the theoretical framework of BFT and EFE. Both frameworks support and values the experiences of Black woman.

There are two approaches to narrative analysis: inductive and deductive. The inductive approach takes a bottom-up view, which allows the data to speak for themself (Clandinin, 2013). The deductive approach is more confirmatory, using theories and frameworks to test a narrative (Clandinin, 2013). For this study, I used the inductive approach, taking a more exploratory approach in analyzing the data and allowing the sista scholars to tell their own stories.

In the spirit of BFT, the lived experiences of the sista scholar were the vital component of the analysis. Collins (2000) believed in the value of the natural voice; thus, allowing the sista scholars to speak freely and uninhabited was the key to capturing their stories in their natural voice. The purpose of narrative analysis was to "emphasize content and its meanings" (Josselson, 2011, p. 226). In this study, the sista scholars and I sought to understand the lived experiences of Black women as they attended institutions of higher education as undergraduate students at an HWI. Honoring and treating with respect the experiences of the sista scholar is a key principle of EFE, which worked well with sista circle methodology.

Coding

Elliott (2018) described coding as breaking data down to form something new. To do so, I used narrative analysis to code and interpret the data. The process included data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data Reduction. After conducting the sista circles, I reduced the data by looking for patterns throughout the conversations. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), data reduction is the process of selecting, simplifying, and extracting themes and/or patterns from the data sources used. In this phase of analysis, my goal was to look for quotes that were pertinent to the research questions posed. A list of themes was compiled to compare the stories.

Each sista circle was transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. Quotes were used to capture each sista scholar's unique individual story (Josselson, 2011). The categorical analysis consisted of reviewing the data to reveal similarities and differences that

appeared across the sista scholars' stories (Josselson, 2011). These connections served as emergent themes for the research study.

Data Display. Once the data were reduced to reveal the themes, I began to organize the data in a visual manner. A data display is an organizational tool used to visually show the outcomes of the data that have been reduced (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I used a matrix to visualize the data analyzed. The matrix consisted of concepts, themes, and quotes from the data reduction phase. These data were arranged to show where they intersected in support of emerging themes for the study. These themes are seen as knowledge in EFE and BFT (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006).

Draw Conclusions. Lastly, this phase of the coding analysis process involved making meaning of the data that were extracted and summarized. At this point, I used the data collected and analyzed them to make meaning of the sista scholars experiences and formed my own evidence-based conclusions as to the meaning of the data. Data were derived from the information shared by the sista scholars. These stories were important to them and provided insight into their experiences. According to BFT and EFE, the themes and data derived are considered knowledge (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006). This generated knowledge was sent to participating sista scholars for review. Another key facet for BFT and EFE is that the stories of the sista scholars are valid because they are their lived experiences. Having the sista scholars confirm the data were true to their experiences as they told them supports BFE and EFE.

Trustworthiness

The cornerstone of all research is the trustworthiness of the process. To achieve trustworthiness, I used several strategies that strengthened the trustworthiness of the research. Specifically, I used reflexivity, triangulation, and data authenticity.

Reflexivity

EFE urges the researcher to be a participant so the researcher is not just taking from the sista scholars, but also giving. As such, my role as a researcher and as a participant in the sista circles was important; however, I maintained my subjectivities and did not allow them to permeate the research. Reflexivity was used to identify and harness my own biases to make sure they did not taint the process.

Journaling was an integral part of the research process. I used journaling to harness my thoughts, capture any ideas as they came to me, and reflected on the overall research process. In addition, I used journaling to process any prompts from the sista scholars and my thoughts related to the sista circle conversations.

Triangulation

Another means to ensure trustworthiness was to engage in the triangulation of the data by using multiple sources of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015a). To achieve this goal, I compared my notes with the sista circle transcriptions for comparison and cross-checking of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015b). Having multiple perspectives from which to review the data helped to build the trustworthiness of the data collected.

Data Authenticity

I employed the five-part criteria for data authenticity as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (2005), which are (a) fairness, (b) ontological authenticity, (c) educative

authenticity, (d) catalytic authenticity, and (e) tactical authenticity. These criteria were used to ensure transparency and consistency.

Fairness

Honoring all sista scholar voices was inherent in the epistemological and methodological approaches selected. To omit any sista scholar's voice is considered a form of bias (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). Fairness hinges upon the equitable inclusion of data to create balance in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). To not operate in the spirit of fairness would be an affront to the sista scholar and the epistemological and methodological approaches of the research. Member checks were important to make sure the voices of the sista scholar were captured accurately. I made sure to include the voices of all sista circles, whether they were in consensus or disagreement, because each sista scholar's experiences held value and were worthy to them.

Ontological and Educative Authenticity

Ontological and educative authenticity are paired together and focus on the importance of using data to raise consciousness and bring educational value to people who engage with the data (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). The purpose of this research was to raise awareness of the experiences Black women encountered as undergraduate students at HWIs. By focusing on the ontological and educative authenticity of the research, I encouraged the sista scholars to share and reflect on their experiences. Collins (2000) pointed out each experience is unique to the Black woman who experienced it. Not all Black experiences are the same and, as such, there is something to learn from each other by sharing those experiences.

Catalytic and Tactical Authenticity

Lincoln and Guba (2005) believed after completing research and providing the results, the results should spur the sista scholars to want to act because of the knowledge gained through the research. In conducting this research, I wanted sista scholars to engage in some type of continued support of one another that would be beneficial to creating an inclusive environment in their academic departments and campus community.

Positionality and Reflexivity Statements

My K–16 education positioned me to be in spaces that were not welcoming due to my identity as a Black woman. I can distinctly remember an incident in kindergarten that left me wondering why I was treated differently than my friend who identified as white. As I got older, I found myself constantly being questioned by teachers and administrators as to my presence in a particular space. By high school, I was one of the top students in my class, but I did not fit my community's mold of a smart student. Higher education provided some solace, but not much, because I realized people like those I encountered in K–12 exist in higher education as well. These experiences began a life of my questioning if I was good enough to inhabit the same space as my counterparts.

As a higher education professional, I often encountered students who were traveling on a path I had journeyed. My role as an academic advisor in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics allowed me to interact with students from all backgrounds, but it was the Black female undergraduate students whose stories were remarkably like mine. Hearing their encounters of feeling isolated, alone, and unwelcome triggered memories of my past in which I felt the same way. These encounters led me to

my research topic, exploring the experiences of undergraduate Black women at an HWI and how they persist in uninviting spaces to success.

My identities are what define me. From the identities I was inherently born with, to those I choose, their composite is uniquely me. I hold identities as Black, cisgender, able bodied, middle class, first generation, and a woman. I am keenly aware of my innate identities of being Black and female. I would not be true to myself if I did not admit that this double bind (i.e., belonging to more than one historically marginalized identity; Porter & Dean, 2015; Winkle-Wagner, 2015) did not create some obstacles for me in life.

Positionality

Black women are complex and multifaceted, and their experiences are unique. Our identities are based on cultural, personal, and social contexts. These factors are not isolated or singular. Our ability to lean into these identities helps guide Black women as we navigate life. I realize my identities, whether chosen, innate, static, or dynamic, are all encompassing to who I am as a person and how successful I am. As I reflect on how I was shaped and molded into the Black woman I am today, I tend to think about some of the encounters I experienced navigating a male-dominated, white majority environment.

When deciding to explore the experiences and persistence of undergraduate Black women at an HWI, I selected this topic realizing the participants may share similar identities and experiences as myself. I was a talented student who was often the only person like me in my K–16 classes. I remember the constant chatter about why I was present, questioning whether my work as my own, and feeling alone, yet surrounded by others. Understanding the impact of those experiences, coupled with their identity, for the participants and myself, was a factor I considered throughout conducting the study.

Reflexivity

Thurairajah (2019) encouraged qualitative researchers to practice reflexivity by identifying their positionalities and understanding their influence. Wickens et al. (2017) challenged researchers not to let reflexivity end with a position statement; instead, it should be embedded and thread throughout the research. In preparing for the study, I found mapping my positionalities to be particularly important before engaging in the research. Identifying my positionality allowed me to take proactive approaches to maintain transparency in my research.

This work was very emotional. To keep my emotions from impacting the nature of my research, I used journaling to capture how I was feeling along the journey and reflected on how those feelings may or may not have been showing up in my study, as suggested by Thurairajah (2019). I also made sure to balance or check the way my positionalities may have been impacting my research. Debriefing with my peer scholars helped me to keep my positionalities in perspective. Lastly, I used member checks to make sure the information I gathered was reflective of the participants and not my ideas coming through.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented the design of this qualitative narrative analysis study. Sista circle methodology, a culturally relevant and gender-specific methodology, was used to examine the experiences of undergraduate Black women and their support mechanisms to persist at HWIs. The aspects of the research protocol used to conduct this study were discussed, detailing the procedures for participant recruitment and selection, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness. The data gained in this research were

transcribed using the Zoom transcription feature. I also included my positionality

statement in this chapter.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of the study, which sought to explore the lived experiences of Black undergraduate women who attend historically white institutions (HWIs). The chapter provides a detailed account of the themes and patterns that emerged from the data collected through sista circles. The findings shed light on the unique challenges, triumphs, and perspectives of these women, providing a deeper understanding of their journey through higher education in predominantly white settings.

In undertaking this qualitative study, the primary aim was to provide a descriptive account of the undergraduate experiences of Black women who attended HWIs in the southern U.S. region. The findings for the two questions that guided this study are presented in two sections: (a) undergraduate experiences and (b) support. Using sista circle methodology, I was honored to engage with a group of eight sista scholars as they told their stories of their undergraduate experience and where they found support. Each participant identified as a Black or African American woman who attended an HWI in the southern region of the United States as an undergraduate student. A pseudonym was either selected or provided for each sista scholar to protect their identity in this study. During the sista circles, the sista scholars connected with each other as they shared their individual stories of their undergraduate experiences. The findings from this study show how Black undergraduate women attending HWIs described their collegiate experience

and found support. This chapter includes sista scholar introductions, a descriptive narrative of the sacredness of the methodology used, and a table depicting the demographic information of the sista scholars. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

Sista Scholars' Descriptions

This section displays the sista scholars' demographic information and a brief introduction of each sista scholar according to how they chose to introduce themselves at the first sista circle meeting. The inclusion criteria for participation included identifying as a Black female student who attended an HWI as an undergraduate student.

Displayed in Table 2 are the demographics of the sista scholars along with their pseudonyms. Each sista scholar self-identified the information they wished to disclose to me. Included in this demographic information is their age, classification, undergraduate institution, and undergraduate major. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the anonymity of the sista scholar participants and their institutions.

Table 2

Sista Scholar Demographics

Pseudonym	Classification	Institution	Undergraduate major	Age
Angela	Graduate	South State	Kinesiology	25
Carter	Undergraduate	State University	Health promotions	22
Charlotte	Graduate	State University	Political science	23
Delores	Undergraduate	State University	Biology	21
Mary	Graduate	Bayou University	Sociology & Spanish	27
Nancy	Graduate	Campbell University	Did not identify	28
Naomi	Graduate	Gulf University	Interdisciplinary studies	22
Sarah	Undergraduate	State University	Mathematics	21

Angela

Angela was a 25-year-old who received both her undergraduate and graduate degrees at South State. As an undergraduate, she majored in kinesiology. She was the oldest of three girls. Although not a first-generation student, she stated she often felt like she was experiencing college for the first time because her family did not understand her experiences.

Carter

Carter was a 22-year-old recent graduate of State University. As an undergraduate student, she majored in health promotions and participated in various student organizations. From the metro Atlanta area, she was the oldest sibling, having one younger brother. She aspired to become a health lawyer, specializing in Black maternal health.

Charlotte

Charlotte was a 23-year-old recent graduate with a master's degree. She spent the prior 6 years as a student at State University: 4 years as an undergraduate, and the prior 2 years as a graduate student. Her undergraduate major was political science with an international affairs concentration. From northwest Georgia, she was the oldest daughter in her family.

Delores

Delores was a 21-year-old who attended State University. She was studying biology, while minoring in psychology, with a pre-med concentration. She was of Caribbean descent and was an only child and a first-generation student.

Mary

Mary was a 27-year-old who recently graduated from State University with her graduate degree. She attended Bayou University in Louisiana as an undergraduate, where she majored in Spanish and sociology. While at Bayou University, she had the opportunity to participate in study abroad to Ecuador.

Nancy

Nancy was a 28-year-old recent graduate student with a master's degree. She attended Campbell University as an undergraduate student. She was from a rural town east of Atlanta. She aspired to become a higher education professional.

Naomi

Naomi was a 22-year-old who attended Gulf University in Florida as an undergraduate student. She majored in interdisciplinary studies as an undergraduate and recently completed graduate studies at State University. As an undergraduate, she was involved with the Panhellenic Council. She identified as biracial.

Sarah

Sarah was a 21-year-old student who was attending State University. She was studying mathematics. She transferred from another institution to State University after her 1st year. She was the youngest sibling in her family. She stated she related to being a first-generation student even though she had an older sister who did attend college. She was also from the metro Atlanta area.

Sista Circle Sacredness

The use of sista circles as a methodology holds profound sacredness in the frameworks of endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE) and Black feminist thought

(BFT). These transformative spaces embody the essence of communal healing, intergenerational knowledge sharing, and collective empowerment. Sista circles create a sacred space where Black women gather, connect, and engage in authentic dialogues, rooted in their lived experiences and ancestral wisdom. This methodology recognizes the inherent value and power of sisterhood, fostering trust, vulnerability, and support among participants. By centering the voices and perspectives of Black women, sista circles challenge dominant narratives, disrupt oppressive systems, and elevate the validity of experiential knowledge as a form of expertise. The sacredness of sista circles lies in their ability to create transformative spaces that honor and uplift the diverse stories, struggles, and resilience of Black women, amplifying their voices and contributing to the advancement of EFE and BFT.

Centering Activity

As the sista scholars arrived and settled in for the sista circle session, I displayed on a projector screen a quote from Maya Angelou's book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. I chose the quote "We may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated" because of its message of resilience, determination, and hope. I wanted the sista scholars to sit in reflection of this quote before we engaged in more conversations about the experiences of undergraduate Black women at HWIs. The quote evoked different feelings for each sista scholar, who could connect it to something they learned along the way as undergraduate students. The captivating conversation that followed was enlightening and engaging. Many of the sista scholars' responses centered around the adversity and challenges they encountered as Black undergraduate women at HWIs. Each

acknowledged they faced various obstacles, disappointments, and some defeats, but they never gave up.

Carter

> I kind of wanted to look at it from a being involved type of lens. So, like my sophomore year, I was getting involved in the different organizations on campus like National Council for Negro Women, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and sometimes Black Affairs Council. Shout out to Delores. The quote to me was that when you go after leadership roles, you might not get them, not just specifically the ones that are within Multicultural Services and Programs, but like I know people who went for things like Arch Society, and they were not given the position at that moment. But that does not mean you stop trying to apply for it within the coming years. 'Cause I know people that have tried the next year and then, they got it so like, not letting the first no stop you from going after what you want.

Charlotte

> For me, it was more internal defeats. Not really anyone telling me that I was not doing anything right, but more so myself, not knowing if I was living up to the standard that I wanted to live up to. Another point, State University was not affirming my Blackness. That was the point that I was like, okay, this might be a little weird. I want a school to also celebrate that part of you. Even though it might be like a little detail to them, that is a big deal for us Black women. I wish that there were more opportunities for awareness about that. So, more so not

academic, or social struggles for me, but more so like just upkeep of me as a person and wanting State University to affirm that.

Delores

I came to State University during like, the COVID year. I came here to State University, and I was like, the only person in my graduating class coming here. I also did not know anybody except for my roommate I met at Daze Weekend. It was very helpful. Then, I went and moved to Brumby. And everyone is like, "Oh, Brumby is gonna be so Black." And then, it was not. And then, we could not have guests. It was like Brumby was like a fortress. Could not have people over. And there was like, nothing going on on campus. It was just rough. I was not that far away from home, like an hour and a half. But I did not have a car. So, it was just like I was here on campus and trying to make friends. But it was hard to make friends and like, be like, just do things. So, it was a very slow year until I got to my sophomore year, here I feel like that is where I really made my friends.

Mary

We just can't be defeated or let that get to us because like, we're just going to have to show up and be our authentic selves at all times because our ancestors did, you know, go through what they went through for us to just kind of like, you know, like be anything other than our true selves. Yes, because we can very easily be defeated or feel defeated or feel like we have to switch it up or like, you know like, maybe flat iron that hair a little bit more, like take a wig out. Like you know, I think just showing up as our authentic selves, our true selves is like just doing ourselves a service.

Naomi

I would add to that. I was very driven, and I was really involved, and I got really involved really fast. I was in Panhellenic in my sorority, but like constantly throughout the 4 years, every single time I got a position or I got an award or I was in a room, I constantly was having that imposter syndrome of like, am I here because I'm a Black woman, or am I here because I have the skills and like, I deserve to be here. So, that is something I always was like, okay, like I might have left that and felt like I was choking in that moment. But that does not mean that I did not deserve to be in that space and that what I added to the space was not valued.

Sarah

I did my 1st year at another institution in the state, and that 1st year of college was rough. Not only was it so far from home, like I am from the metro Atlanta area, it is like 3 1/2 hours away. I did not have my family as a support system, but also it was just hard to make friends. I did not know anybody down there. Yes, and it was rough. Then, we got COVID 2nd semester of my 1st year, and we got sent home for a year. But then, I transferred to State University during my sophomore year, and it has been like it was rough in the beginning, but it has been like a growing experience. I have made so many friends. After that 1st year of college, I felt very defeated. I was like, "Do I even want to do this?" Even during COVID year, I was like, this is not it. I took a gap year and now, I feel like I found my place. Found my people. And things are on the up and up.

These sista scholars' reflections were particularly poignant because they captured the essence of what each sista scholar was saying—they did not let setbacks break their resolve to accomplish their goals. These ladies and their stories taught the important lesson of embracing the journey fully. They maintained a positive mindset throughout their undergraduate career and continue to approach life with courage and determination, refusing to give in or up to whatever they encounter. This experience aided in setting the tone for the sista circle, allowed the sista scholars to become comfortable with one another, created a safe space to share their innermost thoughts, and offered a sense of solidarity among the sista scholars.

Undergraduate Experiences

The first research question of this study asked how Black women described their undergraduate experiences at an HWI. Findings from this study showed undergraduate Black women at HWIs find themselves at a crossroads with the intersections of their identity, placing them in a unique and marginalized position. The emergent themes from the data related to this research question were (a) finding community, (b) institutional support, and (c) pressure to succeed.

Finding Community

The sista scholars provided narratives of their experiences finding community on their respective campuses. The finding community theme is separated into three subcategories: (a) relationships, (b) faculty and staff, and (c) formal organizations.

Relationships

At the heart of finding community lies the formation of meaningful connections with peers who share similar backgrounds and experiences. When asked to reflect on

experiences that brought them joy as undergraduate students, the sista scholars shared their friends and group chats were important to their experience. Naomi shared how having other Black undergraduate women support her identity made a difference:

> I joined my sorority and one of my sisters, her name was Sarah, and she was Black. And she is like, "Hey, your hair is whack." Like in the sweetest way. She brought me to the beauty store, and she introduced me to people who liked to braid. And like, I went through this whole journey. And it was because she wanted me to accept that part of myself. Finding other Black women who supported me, and I think that I do not know if it is like, the joy necessarily. But I feel like it happened organically, like we were in spaces where we shared interests, and it was not just like, we are Black women, so we are all gonna be best friends. Which I feel is an underlying thing also because they are foundational, but it was really impactful when we, like, have shared values and experiences.

Expanding on Naomi's statement, Charlotte added her experience with group chats was helpful in finding community as an undergraduate. The following exchange resulted:

> **Charlotte:** I think going off that too, it is funny how many group chats I have that are just like for Black people. But I did not realize that it is just organic. There is one for class, there is one for like, a job that I had at one point. Like the spaces that I am in, and we just feel a need to, like be together and, like, come together. But it just makes everything more fun too. And it just makes you feel like you have a community like a subcommunity within a larger space that you are in. So, I hope that never goes away

because I just feel like that makes class so much more fun and easier. And like, just enjoyable. Really, when you have someone who looks like you. But it is not even like, just looking like you. It is like if someone says something you are like, "Oh, did you catch that?" But maybe no one else caught it, but we caught it. Just because. So, I think having those spaces is really important. Even though we do not really do it just because we are like, Black women or something.

Angela: Like, when you are in a room or at the grocery store, you are like, looking at each other. You see something that happens and when you see another Black woman, y'all look at each other like, "Did you see that?" It is a good feeling to not have to explain yourself.

Charlotte: That does feel good.

Nancy: You do not have to be the person to always have to explain.

Mary: What is understood does not have to be explained.

Additional conversations ensued around finding community among the relationships created as an undergraduate. Nancy talked about her long-lasting relationships that endured the test of time, sharing, "One of the joys that I experienced during my undergraduate times, we had a collective group of people, of Black people that just organically came together and happened, and we are still friends today."

Faculty and Staff

Faculty and staff (i.e., both professional and student staff) played a crucial role in facilitating community building for Black undergraduate women at HWIs. Delores spoke

highly of her interactions with her class advocates (CAs) and the wonderful experiences they helped foster for her. She shared:

> Yeah, I think that something that State University does well that I like is having CAs in the building. It was hard to meet people but having Deion as my CA and then knowing Quinn as another [resident assistant] in the building, helped to ground me. So, I always liked to find them. That is where I hung out, like a lot on Quinn's floor. And yes, it was helpful to have somebody that was there for me specifically to help me grow. And then, I stayed friends with Deion. I still talk to Deion, even though he graduated, and like, now that I am about to be in that role as a CA in Myers, it is just something like pouring back into what already was poured into me.

Mentoring and supportive relationships with faculty members who identify with and understand Black women experiences can positively or negatively impact their academic and personal development.

Additionally, the presence of diverse faculty and staff members can create an inclusive campus climate where these women feel seen, heard, and valued. Informal interactions, such as informal discussions or office hours, can provide opportunities for mentorship and guidance beyond the classroom. Several sista scholars believed it was important that faculty and staff receive some type of diversity training. Encouraging faculty and staff to undergo diversity and cultural competency training can further promote an environment that fosters community and support for Black undergraduate women. The following exchange exemplified this idea:

Mary: It is really important, especially for white professors to know how to

provide support to students. Just because it is not a one-size-fits-all

approach for each student. As far as other identities, for instance, you

know, being disabled or anything like, anything physical. That is

necessary. So, that is something that was kind of a challenge that my

situation just kind of like, confused. Because, like I said, in Spanish class

like, I was the only Black person.

Charlotte: And those are both minorities.

Mary: There was just a lot that came with that.

Formal Organizations

One way these women found community was by seeking out and engaging with
student organizations that celebrated and embraced their cultural heritage. Black student
associations, cultural clubs, and affinity groups provided a safe and empowering
environment where they could connect with peers who shared similar experiences,
values, and aspirations. Through these organizations, Black undergraduate women can
foster a sense of belonging, cultivate leadership skills, and collectively advocate for
issues that are important to them, enhancing their overall college journey. Hearing
Delores speak of her experiences with organizations that enhanced her collegiate
experience was refreshing. She shared:

A lot of joy that I have is like, pouring back into things. I came to Dawg Camp

when they still had Dawg Camp Rise and then, I became a Dawg Camp

counselor. So, I like doing things and being that person that someone could come

to. And then, Black Affairs Council is also something that is one of my biggest

joys. Because the 1st year, I did not know it I needed something, the 1st year to

ground me. Having the freshman board and like, meeting other Black people was

what really grounded me. And then, moving up in the world, like seeing you grow

and like Black State University Bulletin. Just like, trying and making things

happen is what makes me happy. So, like going back into BAC is my biggest joy,

and now I am the president.

Although Delores recounted positive experiences of her involvement with clubs, Mary
had a different encounter that was not so positive. Mary said:

So, I feel like the clubs that they did have in place that were supposed to be

supportive to not just Black women, but just Black people. Just the Black

community. They were there. But I feel like my challenge, like the biggest

challenge of all, was the lack of consistency. I do not want to go too deep into it. I

was just like, oh, they are just a little unorganized. But the disorganization would

start to become a real thing. Like with meetings, we are like, okay, now we can

meet up once a month when I am finally free. But then, they are like, last minute,

let us change it. Like, we come to find out one time it was like a fraternity,

actually a white fraternity that reserved the room after us, after the National

Association for the Advancement of Colored People. But then, like, somehow,

they were able to keep that room. We had to end up switching and I never knew

the reason, but it is different things like that. Like even though there were

different programs or clubs there to support us, it is like they just were not. They

are just on the back burner. And then, a lot of the Black population did not even

know these clubs existed. They were not being advertised, which just was not

taken seriously. I was supposed to get a shirt that I paid for that I still never got.

And then, there was not like, a huge backing for it either. I do not even know who

the advisor was. I do not even know if there was an advisor, so that is just how

inconsistent it was. And so, that kind of discouraged like, half the people to

bounce. And you are like, okay, you are wasting my time. I could be studying,

like, doing something else. But then, what I ended up doing was joining another

club. So, like a Spanish club that you know, I was the only Black person in there.

But they did have that consistency. And so yes, that was just unfortunate. They

had the system there, but it just felt like proper management and advertising was

not there.

As the conversation about clubs continued, there was a point where the sista scholars

reflected on the in and out group dynamics of clubs. They mentioned how, when holding

multiple identities, sometimes connecting with the less prominent identity could put them

on the outside with people they thought were their own. Naomi and Delores shared their

thoughts and received comfort from their peers by sharing their experiences, as shown in

the following exchange:

> **Naomi:** This is like, I do not know how this is going, but it is my thoughts, so I
>
> am going to share. As I mentioned earlier, I feel like I grew up in a white
>
> space. And so, I was always comfortable, more comfortable in white
>
> spaces. And so, I actually feel like a challenge for me when I got to
>
> college and like, still now is like being in or around really Black spaces. It
>
> makes me more uncomfortable because I'm not as confident in that part of
>
> my identity. I did 23andMe in 2019 and I found out that I have Nigerian

roots. But like, in my undergrad institution at Gulf University, there were clubs, but you did not know if they were like in group, out group type clubs. Or like, it's really hard to tell what events are open for anyone to come and to learn and experience and to share. Or like, this is for us and our identities and like, it is a closed meeting. So, I think that the advertisement needs to be clear. It was hard to even learn or figure out more about myself in that way in terms of institutional structured things. But yes, it was a challenge for me because I was trying to figure out who I was and like, how do I connect with this part of me, but then, also working through the uncomfortability of being in spaces where I like, do not know what is going on. And that was the challenge for them.

Charlotte: Thanks for sharing that.

Delores: I agree with that. Like being here at State University. My mom is Caribbean. I was not super into my Caribbean identity here. But I feel like it is harder to be in other groups, like ethnic groups. For example, African Student Association, like I do not know if I go to their events or like, go to their general body meetings, I am just not gonna get it. I feel like you are always like, low key you like, a step behind, like a step out of like, their group. I can go to like the big events, like African Night and things like that. But I would not feel comfortable enough to just go to an event, especially since I do not know a lot of them like, personally.

Overall, finding community at HWIs for Black undergraduate women signified a proactive journey of creating and embracing spaces where they could thrive, empowering

themselves and others through meaningful connections, cultural expression, and fostering a shared sense of belonging that enriched their overall college experience.

Institutional Support

Institutional support for initiatives that raised awareness of racial and gender issues, such as seminars, workshops, and awareness campaigns, encouraged open conversations about the experiences of Black undergraduate women, further strengthening their sense of community and connection in the larger campus community. From the sista circle conversations, two subthemes emerged as the sista scholars talked about institutional support: imposter syndrome and representation.

Imposter Syndrome

Angela spoke of a disappointing encounter she had with one of her professors in her 1st semester. This encounter could have been damaging, but she chose to persevere. Angela shared:

It is even in our academic spaces. We not really having Black professors or Black teachers; it was really hard for me to go there and say, "Look, I am struggling like in this class." I remember one experience when I was a first-year student. It was my 1st semester, and I went to talk with my professor. He was a white man, and I was taking human growth and development. When I was in high school, I did not really have to study like that. It was really like, it was not really challenging. So, it was a big adjustment going to a 4-year institution where I gotta open the book. I realized that I was struggling, but I had excelled academically in high school. So, and like back to the quote, failure was not an option. It is like, you are gonna pass. You are not going to quit. It is not an option. You have to keep going. And so, I

went to him. I was like, "Hey, it is mid semester. I am still struggling. I need some help." And he says to me. And there are a whole lot of other things that can go into this. But he does not ask, "How are you studying? You come to every class, where do you sit?" Different things like that. He asks, "Where are you from?" And I was like, oh, Houston, Mississippi. He is like, "That is a small town," and I was like, "Mm-hmm," and he was like, "Well, maybe you should think about community college." That really altered my whole undergraduate process because that was my 1st semester as a freshman and I felt not worthy like, you were saying, not affirming in that space. And I was like, "Do I deserve to be here?" It is difficult. Like, hard to work through. And so, that is something we need, that representation in different spaces. Somebody who just gets it.

Delores added to the conversation on imposter syndrome by discussing her feelings. She shared:

I also feel like I have imposter syndrome with like not having a Black professor in my major, male or female. My major and minor, I do have Black people in my humanities, but it is like also like, within the Black community.

Representation

Diverse faculty representation played a significant role in affirming their presence, validating their experiences, and cultivating an academic setting conducive to personal growth and academic success. Both Angela and Delores spoke about having imposter syndrome while also alluding to the lack of representation in academics. Sarah echoed their sentiments with her own experience. The following exchange happened between Sarah and Angela:

Sarah: So, I definitely can relate. I am the person to experience things and I do

not really have anybody to turn to. I mean, in the grand scheme, like my

professors and stuff, like some of them are minorities, but they are men,

and then, like, some of them are women. But they are white. Or a different

race or whatever. So, it is just something different that I do not think I

have seen. There might be one Black woman and I have not had her class.

So, it is rough out here.

Angela: I was excited when I got into my master's program to see a Black lady,

and she was into critical race theory.

Pressure to Succeed

The pursuit of success for Black undergraduate women at HWIs is often

accompanied by a unique and multifaceted set of pressures. These pressures emerge from

the intersectionality of their racial and gender identities, and the broader societal

expectations and historical contexts that shaped their educational journey. Navigating

these pressures requires a delicate balance between personal aspirations, cultural

affirmation, and the prevailing academic norms in white environments. Through their

conversations, the sista scholars shed light on their experiences as undergraduate Black

women at HWIs and the pressure they felt to succeed. Delores recalled an experience

where she felt succeeding was not taken as seriously by her white residents as her Black

residents. Delores shared:

I was a resident assistant this past year in Church [residence hall]. I had like, 64

residents and only five were Black residents. So like, majority white, and I just

like watching them as first years. I had a resident. She is struggling with stats, and

she was a white resident. She was just like, "Yeah, as long as I get my C, I will be fine." I was like, "I will slip you my notes to try to make sure you pass." But for her, it was like, "Oh, whatever, whatever." But I know like, my Black residents, they are like, "I have to get it." Like, you cannot make a misstep. Another one of my residents, she was Black, she was also getting her dental assisting hours so she could prep for school. And I am like, there are extra steps or things about which they are not thinking. If you are trying to be a medical doctor, you need shadowing. But if your parents' friend is a doctor like, you have that. I feel like a lot of my race and for me, like I have to do that extra work to find somebody. None of my friends are doctors. Or no one in my family is anything. So, like seeing them as first years, they had to work so much harder. It is just like so much harder for them.

In the sista circles, the sista scholars discussed the multifaceted aspects of the Black woman experience in higher education. The sista scholars focused on three distinct subthemes that played a pivotal role in shaping their experiences: (a) family pressure, (b) strong Black woman stereotype, and (c) working twice as hard. Through their dialogue, the sista scholars and I explored their understanding of the challenges and resilience of Black women attending HWIs in the context of their families, societal expectations, and the double standard.

Family Pressure

Unknowingly, families can also put undue pressure on students to succeed. Several of the sista scholars recounted experiences where they thought their family and

friends were compounding an already stressful situation. The following exchange

between Sarah and Naomi illustrated this pressure:

> **Sarah:** I just felt that way for a very long time and I like, got burned out. And I had to like, take a lot of the academic pressure, just pressure in general off myself. Because like I said earlier, I am basically the first person in my family to do this and my parents, I feel like a lot of it, like is like, absent minded that they put the pressure on me. They are like, "You are gonna be our first kid to graduate." And it is like, I do not think they realized how much pressure that is, but it is rough. And then, it is like, when I took my gap year, my dad was so upset. I was just, like, not in a great place. I was depressed, school was not going great. When I told my dad that I was gonna take a year off, he was like, very discouraging like, "I just cannot believe you are dropping out." I was like, "I am not dropping out. I am just taking a break." I was like, "I am going back next January" or whatever. But yes, like you said, we put so much pressure on ourselves to, like, succeed and make sure we are doing the best we can.

> **Naomi:** You still get the same degree as everyone. It is something that is like, a big comparison. I feel like across all, like socioeconomic statuses, and because I feel like for Black families, college just means more in a way. And it is also like, some of the first generations that have access to it. And so, there is all this like, catching up to be done.

The burden of family pressure, particularly the weight of expectations to succeed,

is a fundamental aspect of the Black female experience at HWIs. These pressures can

have both positive and negative effects on their academic and personal journeys. Understanding the complex interplay between family expectations and individual aspirations is crucial in appreciating the resilience and determination of Black women as they navigate the challenges of higher education in predominantly white spaces.

Strong Black Woman Stereotype

The notion of the strong Black woman is a complex and deeply rooted cultural archetype that holds significant relevance for undergraduate Black women navigating the challenging environment of HWIs. This concept, although celebrated for its portrayal of strength and resilience, carries a multitude of implications and expectations that can influence the experiences and trajectories of Black women pursuing higher education in white spaces. As these women strive to excel academically, socially, and personally, they grapple with the intricate interplay between the strong Black woman identity, cultural authenticity, and the realities of their educational journey, as illustrated in the following exchange:

> **Carter:** I guess the only other challenge I was going to say that is constantly faced as an undergraduate Black woman is, I do not know, that feeling of having to just be on top of your game all the time. And I know we started talking about it more like, as I was graduating, like the whole balancing out, like doing your academics, but also having your own life.

> **Naomi:** I love that you said that. I feel like the entire time I was in undergrad, every single Black student, particularly Black women, that I ran into was so high achieving. Like, busting our butts to get things done. Like, we cared so much. And we also put so many more things on our plate. Like

how you were saying, you have these roles now that are attached to your

identity because you want to give back. I had first-year students and

sophomores when I was a senior that I was mentoring, just on my own

time because that is something that I am not getting.

Naomi continued the conversation by talking about how the college experience looked

different for her compared to her white colleagues. She shared:

I would go to sorority events, and I am doing all these things. I have a whole list

and then, I see that like, all these other people there are just vibing and chilling.

Like, that is an amazing experience and I am glad that they had that, but I would

look at that and be like, "What in the world are you doing?" Like, I have people

who, like I was a scholarship kid like, I have to work to keep up my grades. Like,

I have people like family members and family friends who are helping me pay for

my sorority. If I was not showing them constantly that I was making the most of

what they were putting their money towards, I felt like I was not doing my college

experience justice. And so, for me, having a full planner was like expected. I am

paying all this money or other people are paying all this money for me to have

this experience and you are just sitting in your room playing video games. I do not

know; it is just something that I noticed.

The strong Black woman stereotype is a double-edged sword for Black women

pursuing higher education at HWIs. Although the stereotype embodies resilience and

fortitude, it can also amplify the pressure to succeed and the reluctance to seek help when

needed. Recognizing the intricate impact of this stereotype is crucial for institutions and

individuals to provide a more supportive and inclusive environment that allows Black women to thrive without the burden of unrealistic expectations.

Working Twice As Hard

The concept of having to work twice as hard to be half as good resonated deeply with the experiences of the sista scholars, reflecting the persistent barriers they encountered in their educational journeys. As Delores lamented about her experience helping with a recent student government election, the following exchange occurred:

Delores: This past spring, I helped with the Hope ticket for SGA [Student Government Association]. And like, watching that and having Fatim run as a Black woman. I was like, that never happened, to be a Black woman president at State University and it is like, I feel like she had to be so accomplished. All of them had to be accomplished. And like, you had to check the boxes like, okay, we have an orientation leader on our team. We have somebody in student government association. We have someone in a sorority. We have someone just getting into a fraternity. So, like, having somebody like, in everything and it is still like, not necessarily being enough, and it is like of course, it is SGA. It is just really a popularity contest. But it is like, even if you look at like, the ticket, it is like, they have to be so much more to be like even seen as like, okay to run and the standard. And I felt like it was just a lot, like, watching it, I would never do it again. It is so hard. It is like it is an involvement bubble at State University because like, there is. You can be involved in the black org is like, that is one thing. But then, you are at your center level. Orientation

leader, like those things like, it is like you have to be like, all these things plus some to get those positions. And that is a lot.

Charlotte: That's just such a good point that you brought up. There is a point my dad says. You have to work twice as hard to be half as good. And that is literally what the SGA tickets are like. There never being a Black woman president is so wild to me because literally, what you said about that ticket, that Hope ticket they had every organization known to man in this university. But like, the winning ticket had like, one orientation leader and one business major and like, that was enough. Like what do you want? I do not know.

Naomi: I feel like I saw something that is like that. Like, you have to work twice as hard to be half as good. And it was like, I am not gonna paraphrase it well. But it was like, white people wake up worthy and Black people have to work for worth. And it was something like that, something along those lines. And I feel like that is what I was hearing when you all were saying that. I feel like we are constantly working to prove that we are worthy of being in spaces. Other white students are encouraged and like, supported in different ways than we are, and I think a lot of it is internal too.

In summary, the pressure to succeed for Black undergraduate women at HWIs is a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in a complex interplay of personal ambition, societal expectations, and cultural significance. Navigating these pressures necessitates a resilient spirit, a supportive community, and a comprehensive understanding of the broader societal dynamics that shape their educational journey. As they forge ahead, these women

redefine success on their terms, reshaping the narrative and leaving an indelible mark on their institutions and beyond.

Support

The second research question in this study was about how Black women described the support they received as undergraduates at an HWI. The journey of undergraduate Black women at HWIs is one of ambition, resilience, and determination. In this journey, the quest of finding support resonated profoundly as these sista scholars navigated an educational landscape where their identities intersected with challenges. Through the lens of the experiences shared by the sista scholars, this section delves into the multifaceted nature of finding support, unveiling a mixture of strategies, relationships, and resources that converged to empower, uplift, and propel these women toward academic achievement and personal growth.

Institutional Frameworks: Seeking Structural Support

Participants did not hesitate to share how they felt about the institutional response to support. The sista scholars agreed there was no institutional framework for support of Black women on their undergraduate campuses. The following is the narrative of several sista scholars as they discussed the phenomenon:

> **Naomi:** There's no structured support in place for your identity as a Black woman. I feel like there are Black women who exist in the space that then take that ownership and mentor and take extra time outside of their job. I found mentors who looked like me or like had similar values to me. That was them putting something on their plate that was additional because it mattered to them. I do not think it was in any way facilitated or assisted by

the university. I think in general, campus support for Black women does not exist.

Nancy: Or there are some that are women centered. So, it is just that identity and not the Black women. Versus the multicultural. And not the women part against the whole person.

Charlotte: Yes, different things for different identities.

Sarah: There's not a whole level of support, like you are either a woman or you are Black. It is not both.

Charlotte: We get things done just because, but still, it is like literally, at what cost? So, if you just look at the numbers and say, "Oh, women are coming here, and they are graduating. They are being retained. They are all good to go." Like, that is all that they are looking at. But it is like, no storytelling of like, the stress you could go through and like, gap years and like, your family stuff. Like, if you are the older sibling, like, that is a whole other thing. But like, just the different identities that we hold as women when it comes to like, being part of a home.

In addition to institutional support, the sista scholars discussed accessibility. A lack of accessibility to resources provided also presented challenges, as can be seen from the following conversation that ensued:

Naomi: It also is like, the difference between like, does something exist and is it accessible? Or advertised? Because I think a lot of campuses can say there is something out there. Like, if I cannot Google it or search it, or like find it, then it is not accessible, and it does not work. So, it does not exist. And

so, I think universities can check off a bunch of boxes and say like, "We have this thing that exists if you go to this website and click the dropdown." Like it is there, but I think that if I cannot find it by myself, I do not know. I think if it is not accessible, it does not exist.

Angela: It is like equality versus equity. It is there for you, but it is not applicable because it is not easy for me to get to, or I do not even know what it is.

Listening to the sista scholars as they discussed their experiences with the lack of institutional support and whether the resource was accessible or not highlighted a crucial aspect of their experiences as undergraduates navigating a white campus.

Peer Support Networks

In the narratives shared by these women, peer support was revealed as a formidable source of emotional sustenance. Through candid conversations and shared reflections, peer support became a vital mechanism through which they confronted and navigated the complexities of their HWI environment. The sista scholars shared how they appreciated the support of their peers throughout their undergraduate experience, reflected by the following discussion:

Delores: For me, my source of support has come from my friends and like, that friend group is a support group that I have built. A lot of my friends are also in similar majors to me, and we have similar journeys and goals for the future. So, I feel like that is where my support has come from, largely from my friend group.

Sarah: I agree with Delores. A lot of my support is from my friends, but outside

of like, school-related things, my older sister is like, a big level of support

for me.

Naomi: I think my main source of support, because I was a Panhellenic woman, I

feel like it was the other Black women in Panhellenic. They are like, some

of my biggest supporters. We had a group chat that was called the Black

Housewives of Pan. And it was just how Charlotte was talking about, like

those naturally organic group chats just happen to exist. And that was like,

an incredible experience for me to be in that group chat and to meet with

people who were in different chapters than me. But we had like, a shared

experience of like, "Whoa, there are only 12 of us in this chat, and there

are a thousand members of Panhellenic." So, like, math is not mathing. It

was also empowering in a way.

The role of peer support networks as a source of support for Black women

navigating HWIs cannot be overstated. These connections provide not only a sense of

belonging but also a vital source of emotional and academic support. The strength of

these networks could be instrumental in helping Black women not only cope with the

challenges they face but also thrive in these predominantly white academic spaces.

Understanding and fostering these peer networks is a crucial step toward creating an

environment where Black women can excel academically and personally.

Cultivating Relationships

Forming bonds with faculty members, staff, or even upper-class students who

shared their backgrounds became a means of access to invaluable guidance, wisdom, and

navigational tools. The sista scholars continued to reiterate staff members were a source of support for them when they were undergraduates. The following exchange ensued:

> **Charlotte:** I think about as an undergraduate really just like, Black staff, really no faculty, I connected with. Alton Sandifer was the assistant to the president at the time when I was an undergrad, but he was an incredible resource to me. Just someone like in the higher administration, I guess just like, seeing him in that position and him being super personable and just like, really understanding the student experience as a Black person. He is probably my main source of support, of course, I got support from other people, but I think not in the way that Alton could give. So, it was unique in that instance of just having someone visible that I could see, and I could contact who is willing to be a support. Also, not everyone is willing to, even if they look like you. So, that was important for me.

> **Angela:** Yes, mine is similar to Charlotte's. Not really any faculty, mainly staff. So, the director in the diversity center, she was a Black lady and then, we had multiple like, Black men in those spaces. But she was the only woman who was Black. She was a source of support. Not even so much of what she said or did but just seeing her in that role. Even though she was the director, she never made it seem like she did not have time for the students.

> **Naomi:** I also had an advisor in one of my organizations. I was involved with Dance Marathon at my university. One of our graduate advisors was a Black woman, and every single week I had one-on-ones with her. And it

was just nice to connect with her and see her in that role. It is also one of the reasons that I chose the field that I chose. I saw representation in a role that I could see myself in for like, the first time. And that was not even until my senior year.

As the conversation continued, the sista scholars also revealed they felt quitting was not an option and they had to push through. They shared the following discussion:

Angela: Like we were talking about yesterday, how it is instilled in you or like, already programmed that quitting is not an option. So, you just kind of push through regardless of how you are doing. I think my grandma like, she expresses a lot about how she was unable to get an education just because of like, history. So, like she could only go to school when it rained because she was in the field the other days. She would pick cotton or different things like this. And so, you know, barely getting a high school diploma and college was not an option. I think just hearing her not be able to and knowing she so wanted to learn. She can read and write a little. But she wants to learn new words. She loves to try text. And like, her being eager to do that but not having the opportunity to. I did not want to take it for granted. That's something that pushed me. I do not have it easy, but I do have more access than she did. So, it helps me to be like, okay, well, I can do it.

Sarah: A lot of times I feel like I am, like rowing the boat by myself. So, it is like it is rough because I feel like I am just like I have to be the one to be like, "You can do this like, you got it," trying to have outside support, but it is

like, I do not know words can only go so far with me. It is like someone

telling you, "You can do it." I am like, "Sure, yes." Like, I feel like a lot of

it is more of like me having to, like, push myself back here and get

through it.

At least two of the sista scholars relied on their faith to get them through their

undergraduate years, as described in the following conversation:

Charlotte: I would say as someone who identifies as a Christian, definitely being

strong in my faith helped me get through a lot of like, just tough times in

college. And I do not know if State University had a part in that, but it was

definitely more of that personal like, there is a bigger calling and purpose

for me, so connecting those two to this journey that I want was really

helpful for me. Just like when I got discouraged or it seemed like a lot of

things were happening at once, just feeling overwhelmed. I would say, yes

that not necessarily with academics, but more so the transition of it all.

And just like self-confidence, like really believing that you are worthy to

be there in those spaces. I would say definitely spirituality and like,

Christianity helps me with that and my experience.

Carter: My ability to enter the experience was majorly contributed to my faith. I

got a lot closer to God over this journey. And yes, just reading my Bible,

taking the Scripture for what it really is, and applying it in my life helped

me endure the tests that I was going through.

Overall, the sista scholars agreed a unique support system for Black women would be ideal. However, they cautioned against creating something new. They suggested depth, not breadth when designing support.

The exploration of finding support in the context of undergraduate Black women at HWIs unveiled a rich landscape complete with strategies that uplifted, relationships that empowered, and resources that fortified. In these experiences, the threads of shared narratives and collective aspirations painted a picture of empowerment—a picture that not only fortified these women against adversity, but also catalyzed their transformation into agents of change in academia and beyond. The interplay of peer networks, mentorship, institutional structures, and familial bonds created a harmonious symphony of support, fostering an environment where these scholars could not only navigate the challenges that arose, but also flourish as they cultivated their identities, amplified their voices, and carved paths toward a future steeped in success and authenticity.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings that emerged because of the analysis of demographic surveys and sista circles conversations. The findings were organized into two distinct parts, aligning with the guiding research questions that steered this study's course. Anchoring the exploration, the first research question drew attention to the profound experiences of the sista scholars as undergraduate Black women on HWI campuses. Through careful analysis, three themes emerged: (a) finding community, (b) institutional support, and (c) pressure to succeed. Shifting to the second research question, the focus centered on the support the sista scholars received while matriculating

at an HWI. In this analysis, the themes that emerged were (a) institutional frameworks:

seeking structural support, (b) peer support networks, and (c) cultivating relationships.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative narrative analysis study was to explore the experiences of Black women who attended historically white institutions (HWIs) as undergraduate students. I explored Black women's experiences through their narratives of joys and challenges in their undergraduate careers. This qualitative study was conducted to gain first-hand knowledge from the sista scholars on what their experiences were attending an HWI. These experiences gave insight into how they defined success for themselves. This study is novel in that it was conducted using a critical analytic framework consisting of Black feminist thought (BFT) and endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE) paired with a narrative analysis process called sista circles. Previous studies on Black women's experiences at HWIs were conducted phenomenologically or in other geographic areas. This study added to the literature by using a different method to gather data.

This chapter includes a discussion of major findings related to the literature on Black women at HWIs, their successes navigating such spaces, and implications that may be helpful for higher education practitioners who interact with Black women. A discussion is also included on connections between this study and previous literature. This chapter concludes with a discussion on the limitations of the study and areas for future research.

Using sista circles, this qualitative study aimed to provide insight into the following research questions: (a) How do Black women describe their undergraduate

experiences at a historically white institution? And (b) How do Black women describe the support they received as undergraduates at a historically white institution? Eight women who identified as Black and attended HWIs participated in this study by sharing their stories.

The experiences of undergraduate Black women who attended HWIs and their success were thought provoking and comprised of six themes: (a) finding community, (b) institutional support, (c) pressure to succeed, (d) institutional frameworks, (e) peer support networks, and (f) cultivating relationships. Some factors related primarily to the students, some to the institution, and some were a combination of both the individuals and the institutions. All the factors helped to provide insight into how to create an inclusive environment for undergraduate Black women at HWIs where they can feel supported and seen.

Interpretation of the Findings

Initially, this study was intended to explore the experiences of Black women who attended an HWI as undergraduates and the impact of those experiences on their success. The study was originally viewed from an academic lens, thinking success meant graduation. However, through the course of research and listening to the sista scholars, I realized academics were not the most pressing issue for them. Sista scholars mostly talked about the invisibility of their identities and how their intersecting identities basically made them void on the campus. Working through those obstacles became the framework for how they defined success for themselves in their academic environment.

The sista scholars did not measure their success in the traditional sense. Success for the sista scholars was feeling as though they belonged and were wanted on the

campus they chose as their undergraduate institution. This idea was supported by Porter and Byrd (2021), Winkle-Wagner (2015), and Zamani (2003). These authors all asserted caution when using academics as a metric of success. Each proclaimed success could and would look different, especially for undergraduate Black women.

My research study does support previous literature (e.g., Corbin et al., 2018; Donovan & Guillory, 2017; Kelly, Gardner, et al., 2021; Stewart, 2017) related to Black undergraduate women and their experiences on white campuses regarding microaggressions, lack of institutional support, and representation. Through their stories, the sista scholars shared their encounters and reflected on their experiences that focused more on their ability to feel welcomed than on their academic success. Although they may have shared similar experiences, each experience was unique to the individual sista scholar. Through shared dialogue, each sista scholar shared their thoughts and feelings about what they encountered. Using the data from the sista circles, I provide an overview of the themes that emerged from their reflections and compare them with the tenets of BFT and EFE.

Finding Community

Finding a supportive community is an essential component of the success of undergraduate Black women (Everett & Croom, 2017; Porter, 2017). Finding community involves actively seeking out spaces, relationships, and opportunities that resonate with their cultural heritage, fostering a supportive network that addresses their unique needs and experiences. BFT emphasizes the importance of building solidarity in marginalized groups (Collins, 2000). Additionally, the benefits of interacting with others for Black women provides solace, identity affirmation, and sisterhood (Porter, 2017). Finding a

sense of community in HWIs is a crucial aspect of the college experience for Black undergraduate women. For the sista scholars, community was a much-needed lifeline, which they found invaluable during their time in undergrad. The unique intersectionality of their identities often meant navigating spaces where they were underrepresented or faced isolation; having someone to walk those halls with them provided a much-needed resource.

Black students often form tight-knit communities with shared experiences. They create spaces for mutual support, understanding, and affirmation. This community provides emotional support and a sense of belonging that can be instrumental in successfully navigating the challenges of HWIs. Seeking out and engaging with student organizations that celebrate and embrace their cultural heritage was a recurring statement among the sista scholars. Several sista scholars spoke of their interactions with student organizations like Black Affairs Council and African Night events to connect with and support their identities. Involvement in student organizations can help to expand social and academic resources, which results in increased ability to successfully navigate one's college campus (Kelly, Raines, et al., 2021; Stewart, 2017).

The sista scholars spoke highly of the cultural organizations, affinity groups, and friends they were able to find community with as undergrads. Everett and Croom (2017) supported the importance of Black women finding community on campus as a means of promoting their persistence and suggested these relationships motivate Black women in the undergraduate experience. The importance of these relationships was affirmed when Delores spoke of how she was motivated by her friends to continue pursuing her dream of completing a science degree to become a doctor. The encouragement and support of

their friends kept them from feeling the isolation and loneliness that could have enveloped them as Black women at HWIs.

Black student associations, cultural clubs, and affinity groups provided a safe and empowering environment where they could connect with peers who shared similar experiences, values, and aspirations. Through these organizations, Black undergraduate women can foster a sense of belonging, cultivate leadership skills, and collectively advocate for issues that are important to them, enhancing their overall college journey.

EFE, which emphasizes valuing and centering marginalized voices, provided a lens to explore the ways in which Black women actively created spaces of affirmation and connection. Sista scholars recounted instances of forming intimate bonds with fellow Black students, engaging in culturally significant events, and establishing platforms for open dialogue. These community-building efforts were informed by the tenets of BFT, which advocates for intersectional solidarity and recognizes the necessity of collective support for marginalized groups.

Institutional Support

Institutional support plays a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of Black women attending HWIs and their success (Shaw, 2017). Adversely, the lack of institutional support could be seen as a barrier to success (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Institutions have historically perpetuated systemic inequalities, making it essential to address the unique challenges faced by Black women. BFT encourages advocating for systemic change to dismantle oppressive structures (Collins, 2000). The sista scholars recalled barriers like lack of mentorship programs, culturally responsive teaching,

inclusive curricula, counseling services, affinity groups, and leadership development as obstacles they had to navigate to create an environment that supported their success.

Some participants recounted instances of engaging with staff members who embraced a holistic approach, acknowledging both academic and personal needs. This approach aligns with the values of EFE, which encourages institutions to acknowledge and address the multifaceted challenges faced by Black women (Dillard, 2000).

However, the narratives also unveiled the need for more comprehensive and sustainable support systems that recognize the unique struggles Black women encounter. The sista scholars spoke of having required training, inclusive initiatives, and cultural curriculum as opportunities for the institution show they are vested in the success of underserved students, especially Black women. Diversity and inclusion programs can provide resources, scholarships, and opportunities for these students. Faculty and staff training in antibias and antiracist practices can create a more welcoming atmosphere for students while also helping to mitigate microaggressions and discrimination, reducing the burden of navigating a hostile environment. BFT supports the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives in the curriculum (Collins, 2000). When Black students see their histories and experiences reflected in their education, it validates their knowledge and contributes to their academic and overall success.

Institutional support is not merely a gesture of goodwill; rather, it is a fundamental necessity for Black women attending HWIs. Institutional support acknowledges the historical and ongoing challenges they face, striving to level the playing field and create equitable opportunities for success. By implementing comprehensive institutional support measures, HWIs can contribute to the academic

achievement, personal growth, and overall well-being of Black women, enriching the educational experience for all students and fostering a more inclusive and just campus community.

Pressure to Succeed

Collins (2000) spoke of how Black women cannot separate their identities; as such, they often receive a double dose of classism, racism, and sexism. The participants' narratives illuminated the ways in which societal expectations, coupled with institutional norms, place immense pressure on Black women to prove their worthiness. This double bind (Porter & Dean, 2015) lends to added stress for Black women (Donovan & Guillory, 2017; Miller, 2017). The pressure to succeed, while challenging, can be channeled in ways that align with BFT. Examples that align and were evident in the data were resilience and grit, activism and advocacy, and holistic success.

Resilience and Grit

Black women often face high expectations and pressure from their communities to succeed. In the framework of BFT, this pressure can be transformed into resilience and determination. Their resilience and determination can motivate students to persist through adversity. This idea was evident in the stories of the sista scholars when several stated, "There was never an option to quit" because they "had to see it through."

Activism and Advocacy

The topic of change came up in the sista circles, with many questioning the seemingly restrictive policies their institutions supported that were not supportive of their success. BFT emphasizes activism and advocacy for social change (Collins, 2000).

Students can channel their drive to succeed into activism on campus, advocating for policies and practices that benefit marginalized communities.

Holistic Success

Success, in the context of BFT, is not solely measured by grades or degrees. Success encompasses personal growth, community contributions, and the ability to uplift others. Black students can redefine success as the positive impact they have on their communities, both on and off campus.

Navigating the pressures to excel academically, socially, and personally was a recurring theme in the participants' stories. The sista scholars mentioned they felt they had to work twice as hard to be seen as half as good. Many of them spoke of constantly staying involved, going above and beyond, and checking all the boxes out of a sense of duty and responsibility. It is essential to acknowledge and address the emotional toll these pressures put on Black women attending HWIs.

Black students' success at HWIs can be understood through the lens of BFT, emphasizing the importance of community, institutional support, and the transformative power of pressure. Success is not just about academic metrics but also about personal growth, activism, and building a more equitable future for themselves and others.

Institutional Framework for Support

Central to the experiences and success of undergraduate Black women at HWIs is the role of institutional frameworks in providing meaningful support (Donovan & Guillory, 2017; Shaw, 2017). Drawing from the tenets of EFE, such frameworks should go beyond surface-level diversity initiatives and embrace a comprehensive approach that recognizes and addresses the unique challenges Black women face. BFT emphasizes the

importance of challenging and reshaping institutional structures to support marginalized communities. Changes to institutional structures can manifest in several ways.

Efforts to improve institutional structures includes the establishment of dedicated support services that are culturally sensitive and attuned to the intersections of race and gender. These spaces should provide resources, mentorship programs, counseling, and workshops that address the unique challenges Black women may face. Moreover, these institutions should prioritize the recruitment and retention of diverse faculty and administrators who can serve as role models and advocates. By weaving the principles of BFT into these institutional structures, HWIs can foster an environment where the concerns, experiences, and aspirations of Black women are not only acknowledged but actively championed, dismantling the barriers that have historically hindered their success.

Peer Networks

Peer networks emerged as pivotal sources of support in the journey of undergraduate Black women at HWIs, aligning closely with the principles of both EFE and BFT. Peer networks and finding community are related concepts but they have distinct characteristics and purposes in the context of personal and social support. Peer networks focus on connecting individuals who share common interests, goals, or experiences, regardless of their demographic backgrounds. Finding community is a broader concept that emphasizes creating a sense of belonging and emotional support in a group of people who share common identities, experiences, or values. Although both peer networks and finding community involve connecting with others, they differ in their primary purpose, structure, composition, function, and the nature of the relationships

formed. Peer networks are task oriented and often bring together individuals with diverse backgrounds based on shared interests while finding community emphasizes emotional support and a shared sense of identity among individuals who have common experiences or characteristics.

These networks create spaces where collective experiences are valued, shared, and validated, offering a counternarrative to the isolation often felt by Black women in predominantly white spaces. Drawing inspiration from BFT, these networks transcend simple camaraderie, becoming platforms for knowledge exchange, skill development, and empowerment. They embody intersectional solidarity and serve as catalysts for personal and academic growth. BFT underscores the significance of solidarity and collective action. The following sections highlight how peer networks supported success for the undergraduate Black women in this study.

Sisterhood and Mentorship

Black women often form tight-knit sisterhoods that provide emotional support and mentorship. Older students may mentor younger ones, sharing their experiences, study strategies, and advice on navigating the institution.

Study Groups and Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning environments can be particularly beneficial for Black women. Study groups and peer collaborations can help in understanding course materials, sharing resources, and enhancing academic performance.

Cultural Organizations

Joining cultural or Black student organizations can provide a sense of belonging and opportunities to connect with peers who share similar experiences and goals. These organizations often host events, discussions, and community-building activities.

Embedded in the framework of EFE, these peer networks serve as powerful agents of change, actively challenging the pervasive erasure of marginalized voices in academic and societal discourse. In this context, peer networks become more than just forums for interaction; they transform into dynamic platforms where the profound insights of Black women are not only acknowledged but also elevated to a position of paramount importance.

These networks, carefully cultivated and nurtured, function as resilient bastions against the historical silencing and marginalization of Black women's perspectives. They are spaces where narratives that have long been relegated to the periphery of academic and societal conversations are brought to the forefront.

In these peer networks, Black women's experiences, knowledge, and wisdom become the cornerstone upon which actionable change is built. Their voices are not merely recognized; they are actively sought after, celebrated, and valued as catalysts for transformation. These networks embody the essence of EFE by affirming that knowledge is not a monolithic construct, but a vibrant tapestry woven together from the diverse, lived experiences of those who have been marginalized.

In doing so, these networks become crucibles of innovation and advocacy, where Black women find solidarity, collective strength, and the agency to shape their own narratives and, by extension, to reshape the broader academic landscape. They provide a

much-needed counternarrative to dominant paradigms, affirming Black women's perspectives are not only valid but also essential to the pursuit of inclusive and equitable knowledge.

Cultivating Relationships

Cultivating meaningful relationships in the collegiate environment becomes an essential component of support for undergraduate Black women at HWIs (Everett & Croom, 2017; Shaw, 2017), deeply rooted in the principles of EFE and BFT. Developing positive relationships with professors and staff members can lead to mentorship, research opportunities, and academic guidance. Black women seek out faculty and staff who are supportive of their goals and interests. Engaging with alumni networks can provide valuable insights, career advice, and networking opportunities. Alumni who have successfully navigated HWIs can offer guidance and mentorship to current students. Community engagement is also a way to cultivate relationships. Building relationships in the broader community can offer support and open doors to internships, volunteer opportunities, and career connections.

Intersecting marginalized identities, such as the identities of the sista scholars, can present many challenges. As a result, fostering relationships with advocates can help them navigate these challenges better on their campuses (Kelly, Raines, et al., 2021). These relationships encompass connections with faculty, mentors, peers, and the broader community. Such connections should extend beyond the transactional, focusing instead on fostering mentorship that recognizes the holistic well-being of Black women, acknowledging the emotional toll of navigating spaces where their identities are marginalized.

The success of undergraduate Black women at HWIs can be understood through the lens of BFT, which emphasizes reshaping institutions, fostering peer networks, and cultivating relationships. Success extends beyond academic metrics and includes personal growth, empowerment, and the ability to effect positive change in and beyond the institution. These approaches empower Black women to thrive in environments that may not always reflect their experiences and identities. Through the lens of BFT, these relationships become sites of resistance against the oppressive norms perpetuated by historically exclusionary institutions. They provide spaces where Black women can authentically express themselves, celebrate their identities, and draw strength from collective wisdom, ultimately contributing to their resilience and success in the academic realm and beyond.

Implications for Theory and Research

The fundamental concept of BFT centers on comprehending the experiences of Black women, particularly in relation to their intersecting identities, with Collins (2000) asserting Black women are the most knowledgeable in articulating their lived experiences. In the following sections, I delve into the rich and multifaceted experiences of the sista scholars participating in this study, drawing upon their narratives and perspectives. These experiences serve as a compelling testament to the assertions put forth by Collins in her influential work. As I explore these experiences in depth, I uncover the ways in which the sista scholars' lived realities resonated with and substantiated Collins's claims. Through their stories, I gained valuable insights into the complex interplay of race, gender, and identity in the context of HWIs. The sista scholar narratives not only shed light on the challenges these individuals encountered, but also

revealed the resilience, agency, and transformative potential that emerged when Black women navigated and negotiated their academic journeys in such institutions.

BFT as a Critical Social Theory

BFT as critical social theory is where practice meets theory. By asserting BFT as a critical social theory, Collins (2000) provided the necessary tools for Black women to analyze and challenge oppressive systems. BFT as a critical social theory points to its commitment to examining and critiquing existing power structures and systems of oppression. Advocacy and activism come into play as Collins encouraged Black women to resist. BFT seeks to uncover the ways racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination intersect and perpetuate inequality (Collins, 2000).

In this study, the sista scholars did not shy away from critiquing and questioning the hiring practices of their institutions and wondering why diversity training was not mandatory, but optional. The data from this study aligned with Collins's (2000) vision of BFT as a critical social theory in that it prompted the sista scholars to analyze institutional policies and practices that may perpetuate racial and gender disparities because of their experiences navigating the campus.

BFT as a critical social theory empowers undergraduate Black women at HWIs to assess and challenge the existing power structures and systems of oppression that affect their educational experiences. Through activism and advocacy, informed by BFT, Black women can work to dismantle discriminatory practices and policies, ultimately contributing a more equitable and inclusive higher education environment.

Black Women's Standpoint

The second distinctive feature of BFT is the concept of Black women's standpoint. Black women's standpoint emphasizes the significance of recognizing and valuing the unique experiences, perspectives, and knowledge Black women bring to the table. The consciousness of Black women is shaped by these experiences. Black women's standpoint acknowledges Black women's positioning at the intersection of race, gender, and often other social identities gives rise to a distinctive standpoint from which they perceive and engage with the world (Collins, 2000). This standpoint is rooted in the idea the experiences of Black women provide valuable insights and contribute to a broader understanding of oppression and resistance.

In conducting this study, the Black woman's standpoint became a powerful lens through which to view the sista scholars' experiences and contributions. For example, the Black woman's standpoint helped me recognize Black women may bring a unique perspective to discussions, research topics, or activism that is informed by their lived experiences as both Black individuals and women. The sista scholars used this standpoint to critique and expand the dialogue to include diverse voices and perspectives, addressing the gaps in representation that exist in many HWIs.

Moreover, the Black woman's standpoint encourages Black women at HWIs to assert their voices in conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus. They may engage in activism and advocacy work informed by their unique standpoint, advocating for changes in policies, practices, and campus culture that reflect their experiences and needs. In this way, the concept of the Black woman's standpoint

empowers undergraduate Black women at HWIs to not only navigate their academic environments but also actively shape them to be more inclusive and equitable.

In summary, Collins's (2000) concept of Black women's intellect emphasizes the importance of recognizing and validating the unique intellectual contributions of Black women. For undergraduate Black women attending HWIs, this concept encourages them to assert their voices and perspectives in academia, challenging traditional notions of knowledge and scholarship and contributing to a more inclusive and diverse intellectual community.

Dialogical Relationship

A third distinctive feature of BFT is the concept of a dialogical relationship. This feature highlights the importance of dialogue, conversation, and collective engagement in understanding and addressing the complex and intersecting oppressions faced by Black women. The meaning-making process for Black women centers around dialogue (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006). When applied to undergraduate Black women attending HWIs, the dialogical relationship becomes a critical tool for navigating their experiences and advocating for change.

This study aligned with this distinctive feature because the sista scholars did not all attend the same undergraduate institution; however, they shared similar experiences that were unique to them and their location. By engaging in these candid conversations, the sista scholars were able to share their experiences and the lessons learned from them. In the context of undergraduate Black women at HWIs, the dialogical relationship emphasizes the importance of open and honest conversations about their unique challenges and opportunities. From the study, the sista scholars discussed how important

it was to form support networks or join student organizations to engage in dialogue with peers, mentors, and allies to share their experiences and strategies for overcoming obstacles. By fostering dialogical relationships, these students can challenge stereotypes, raise awareness, and advocate for positive change in their institutions and society at large.

The concept of a dialogical relationship in BFT underscores the importance of dialogue, conversation, and collective engagement for undergraduate Black women attending HWIs. Dialogical relationships encourages them to engage in open and honest discussions about their experiences, both in their campus communities and in wider society, to address the unique challenges they face and advocate for greater inclusivity, equity, and social justice.

Diverse Responses to Common Challenges

Diverse responses to common challenges is the fourth concept Collins (2000) discussed as a distinguished feature of BFT. This fourth concept of BFT recognizes Black women—due to the intersectionality of their identities—face a range of challenges and obstacles that are shaped by their unique experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and often other social identities like class and sexuality. Despite these common challenges, Black women respond in diverse ways based on their individual circumstances and perspectives. When applied to undergraduate Black women attending HWIs, this concept highlights the importance of acknowledging and respecting the diverse strategies and coping mechanisms they employ to navigate their educational experiences.

Diverse responses were evident based on the conversations with the sista scholars. For example, they each reported common challenges such as racial and gender

discrimination, feelings of isolation, or a lack of representation in the faculty and staff. However, their responses to these challenges varied widely. Some spoke about the need for activism and advocacy work to bring about institutional change, while others focused on building strong support networks in their communities.

Recognizing these diverse responses is important because it underscores the agency and resilience of Black women. The diversity of responses challenges stereotypes that suggest a monolithic or passive experience and highlights the rich tapestry of strategies and coping mechanisms they employ to address the challenges they face. Understanding this diversity is essential for creating more inclusive and supportive environments for undergraduate Black women at HWIs because it allows institutions to cater to the varied needs and aspirations of this community better.

Collins's (2000) concept of diverse responses to common challenges in BFT acknowledges Black women facing similar obstacles often respond in diverse and multifaceted ways. For undergraduate Black women at HWIs, this recognition fosters a deeper understanding of their resilience and agency, allowing institutions to support their diverse needs and experiences better.

Dynamic and Change

Collins (2000) pointed out society and individuals are not static, but constantly evolving. As such, she emphasized the need for flexibility and adaptability in addressing the everchanging forms of oppression and inequality Black women face. Collins argued BFT should be responsive to the shifting social, political, and cultural contexts in which it operates. The concept of dynamic and change underscores the importance of adapting strategies and approaches to address new challenges and opportunities.

The study supports this concept. For instance, as the demographics of HWIs evolve and as new forms of discrimination emerge, Black women may need to develop innovative ways to combat racism and sexism. This process could involve using social media platforms to amplify their voices and raise awareness about campus issues, or it could involve collaborating with diverse coalitions and allies to advocate for change.

The concept of dynamic and change in BFT emphasizes the need for adaptability and responsiveness in addressing the evolving forms of oppression and inequality. For undergraduate Black women attending HWIs, this concept encourages them to be flexible and innovative in their activism and advocacy efforts, ensuring they remain effective in creating more inclusive and equitable educational environments.

Humanistic Vision

The concept of a humanistic vision represents an ideal that centers on equity, justice, and inclusivity for all members of society. BFT recognizes the importance of social justice, not only for Black women, but also for all humans. This vision challenges the oppressive hierarchies and systems that have historically marginalized Black women and other marginalized groups (Collins, 2000). Humanistic vision calls for a society where the humanity of all individuals is recognized and valued, irrespective of their race, gender, or other social identities.

The essence of this study aligned with the humanistic concept of BFT. The sista scholars' participation in the study was so they could participate in advocating for a more inclusive and equitable educational experience by telling their stories. They hoped their experiences would be able to help others who walk the same path and institutions to provide inclusive learning environments for all. The sista scholars, although wanting

changes for Black women, also realized other marginalized populations on their undergraduate campuses needed advocacy and change. Their focus was to ensure all students, regardless of their identities, could fully participate in and benefit from the educational opportunities provided by the institution.

By promoting a campus culture that values the humanity of all individuals, the sista scholars contributed to creating a more inclusive and supportive educational environment that benefitted the entire campus community. The concept of a humanistic vision in BFT advocates for a society that recognizes and values the humanity of all individuals. This vision inspires activism and advocacy aimed at creating a more inclusive and equitable campus environment that respects the diverse identities and experiences of all students.

These six distinctive features of BFT provide a framework for understanding the experiences of undergraduate Black women at HWIs and guide their efforts to challenge and transform oppressive systems while promoting inclusivity, diversity, and equity on their campuses. BFT empowers them to navigate challenges, advocate for change, and thrive in an academic setting that may not always reflect their identities and needs.

Implications for Practice

HWIs have witnessed a growing diversification of their student populations, with Black undergraduate women representing a significant demographic (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021a). Understanding the unique challenges and triumphs that shape their educational journey is imperative for fostering an environment where they can thrive academically, socially, and personally. The findings of this study have several implications for practitioners and policymakers in higher education. The

following sections include specific implications for practice based on the findings of this study.

Center Intersectionality

Institutions of higher education should recognize and celebrate the intersectional identities of Black women. For Black women at HWIs, centering intersectionality means acknowledging the unique challenges they face due to their multiple marginalized identities and understanding that support strategies should be tailored to these intersecting identities. By recognizing and celebrating their multifaceted identities, institutions pave the way for more inclusive and equitable higher education environments. This approach acknowledges the unique challenges faced by Black women and empowers them to navigate these complexities, fostering a richer and more holistic academic experience.

Community Building and Empowerment

Campus administrators should (a) empower Black women to take active roles in shaping their own communities in the HWI environment; (b) encourage them to create spaces where they can define their own narratives, share their experiences, and develop a strong sense of belonging; (c) support and fund student-led initiatives that aim to address the challenges faced by Black women; (d) encourage the creation of intersectional advocacy groups and projects that amplify their voices and concerns; (e) establish and support affinity groups for Black women, providing a space for social interaction, mentorship, and sharing experiences; and (f) encourage these groups to collaborate with cultural centers or diversity offices. Community building and empowerment are vital for fostering an equitable educational experience for Black women at HWIs. By embracing BFT and EFE, institutions acknowledge the importance of centering their experiences,

celebrating their resilience, and empowering them to lead in creating a more just and inclusive educational environment.

Critical Mentorship

Mentorship emerges as a critical component of Black undergraduate women's journey, offering guidance, validation, and a pathway to success. Institutions should prioritize mentorship programs that connect these women with faculty, staff, and peers who can provide meaningful support. Representation matters, and efforts to increase diverse faculty and staff members can help create relatable role models who understand their unique challenges and can serve as sources of inspiration.

Institutions of higher education should (a) develop peer mentorship programs that connect incoming Black female students with experienced peers who can provide guidance, share resources, and offer emotional support; (b) promote mentorship relationships that go beyond academic advice; and (c) encourage mentors to engage in critical conversations about the intersections of race, gender, and success. Mentorship should include discussions about navigating institutional challenges and advocating for change.

Diverse Faculty and Staff, Cultural Competency, and Inclusive Curriculum

Campus administrators should (a) actively recruit and retain diverse faculty and staff members who can serve as role models and mentors for Black women students, (b) ensure diverse perspectives are represented in leadership positions, (c) implement cultural competency training for faculty and staff to ensure they are well-equipped to support the unique needs of Black women students, (d) promote the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives in the curriculum, (e) encourage faculty to create a curriculum that reflects

diverse perspectives and acknowledges the contributions of Black women scholars, and (f) encourage the inclusion of critical race and gender theory in coursework. Diverse faculty and staff, cultural competency, and an inclusive curriculum are vital components of a transformative educational environment. These principles enrich the academic experience for Black women at HWIs and celebrate the value of diverse perspectives in shaping higher education's future.

Focus on Providing Intersectional Services

Institutions should strengthen the presence of cultural centers and safe spaces that cater to the specific needs of Black women. These spaces should offer resources, programming, and a sense of belonging. Additionally, campus administrators should invest in resource centers that offer academic support, career services, and counseling tailored to the experiences of Black women. Practical ways in which administrators could achieve this goal include (a) creating professional development programs and internships that align with the career aspirations of Black women, helping them gain practical experience and confidence in their chosen fields; (b) fostering connections between current Black female students and successful Black graduates who can serve as mentors and provide guidance on career paths; (c) providing opportunities for Black women to assume leadership roles in campus organizations and committees, fostering self-confidence and leadership skills; (d) strengthening mental health services and resources on campus, emphasizing stress management, coping strategies, and providing a safe space to discuss the pressures undergraduate Black women face on HWI campuses; and (e) providing counseling services that are sensitive to the unique experiences of Black women, addressing the psychological impact of racism, sexism, and the pressure to

succeed. Counselors should be trained to recognize and navigate these intersectional challenges.

Critical Engagement With Success Metrics

To promote academic success, institutions should provide targeted academic resources and support services that cater to the specific needs of Black undergraduate women. Suggestions include (a) encouraging a holistic approach to education, emphasizing personal growth, leadership, and civic engagement alongside academic achievement; (b) challenging the conventional metrics of success in higher education that may disproportionately pressure Black women to excel; and (c) promoting alternative measures of success that consider personal growth, community impact, and holistic development. This support could include (a) tutoring programs, (b) writing centers with a focus on inclusive pedagogy, and (c) workshops that address imposter syndrome and enhance study skills. Encouraging faculty to adopt diverse teaching methods and culturally relevant curricula can contribute to a more engaging and empowering learning environment.

BFT helps Black women redefine success beyond traditional academic metrics. Success in this framework encompasses personal growth, community building, activism, and empowerment. It allows Black women to measure their achievements not just by grades but also by their ability to navigate and transform their educational environments.

Cultivate Inclusive Institutional Frameworks

Higher education administrators should practice advocacy in the form of (a) advocating for and actively participating in the development of institutional policies and frameworks that address the unique needs and challenges Black women face and (b)

advocating for changes in admission practices, curriculum development, faculty and staff hiring, and campus climate to better reflect and accommodate the diverse needs of undergraduate Black women. Advocacy includes creating diversity, equity, and inclusion committees that include Black women and their voices in decision-making processes.

Ethical Research and Knowledge Production

BFT challenges the Eurocentric and patriarchal notions of knowledge (Collins, 2000). Campus administrators should (a) recognize and value the diverse forms of knowledge Black women bring to the academic environment, (b) encourage Black women to engage critically with knowledge production and to contribute their perspectives to academic and intellectual discussions, (c) promote research that centers the voices and experiences of Black women, and (d) support the production of knowledge that challenges dominant narratives and contributes to a more inclusive and equitable academic environment.

Regular Assessment and Feedback

Regular assessment and feedback mechanisms play a pivotal role in understanding the evolving needs and experiences of undergraduate Black women at HWIs. Higher education administrators should (a) continuously assess the effectiveness of support programs through feedback mechanisms that are attentive to the experiences of Black women and (b) use their insights to inform policy changes and program improvements. By embracing a commitment to regular assessment and feedback, institutions empower Black women to actively shape and improve their educational journeys, ensuring an environment that truly supports their success and well-being.

By implementing these recommendations, HWIs can provide a more nurturing and empowering environment for Black women students, ensuring they continue to find community, receive necessary support, and succeed academically without being overwhelmed by the pressure to excel. Incorporating BFT and EFE into practice acknowledges the complexity of Black women's experiences, values their agency, and fosters an environment where they can thrive as individuals and as contributors to their communities. BFT and EFE also recognize the importance of confronting systemic inequities and challenging existing power structures in HWIs.

<div align="center">**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**</div>

When conducting a study on undergraduate Black women at HWIs, using the empowering frameworks of BFT and EFE, it became imperative to embrace the myriad opportunities that arose from this research approach and the unique context in focus. This study was distinctly crafted with the purpose of amplifying the voices of undergraduate Black women, recognizing them as dynamic knowledge creators. Historically, their voices have often been confined and underrepresented (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006), but this research served as an empowering platform, allowing their experiences and perspectives to shine prominently.

It is essential to acknowledge the unique set of limitations and opportunities that arise in qualitative research. In the landscape of qualitative research, encountering various limitations inherent to the study's design and execution is routine (Creswell, 2013). These limitations, although intrinsic to the study, offer avenues for further growth and refinement. I acknowledge the inherent limitations of the current study, recognizing

them not as barriers, but as gateways to deeper inquiry and inclusivity in the ever-evolving field of research on Black women at HWIs.

Fully capturing the multifaceted identities of Black women at HWIs is complex. These identities encompass race, gender, socioeconomic status, and more. The complexity of their experiences, shaped by various intersecting factors, remains a challenge. Although the study sought to honor this complexity, there remains a challenge in fully capturing the intricate interplay of these factors in the context of HWIs. Nevertheless, this limitation presents an exciting opportunity to delve deeper into intersectionality by exploring how these multifaceted identities shape and enrich the experiences of Black women.

Although the study endeavored to incorporate historical perspectives, there may be limitations in fully delving into historical forces, like racism and discrimination, that have shaped Black women's experiences at HWIs. Historical documentation and narratives may not be exhaustive, potentially leaving gaps in understanding the historical forces that have shaped the current experiences of Black women. To address this gap, future studies can continue the commitment to historical context by seeking out lesser-known narratives and oral histories, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of the past and its impact on the present.

While embracing the frameworks of BFT and EFE, recognizing the expansive range of perspectives and theories encompassed by these frameworks is imperative. The diversity in BFT includes various theoretical lenses such as womanism, intersectionality, and standpoint theory, each offering unique insights into the multifaceted experiences of Black women. Similarly, EFE explores ways of knowing rooted in marginalized

perspectives and non-Western traditions. This study focused solely on Black women's undergraduate experiences at HWIs. Future research is encouraged to explore the multiplicity of perspectives and theories in BFT and EFE.

The constraints on resources, such as funding and participant access, are inherent challenges in research (Creswell, 2013). Although I made commendable efforts to work in these constraints, future research can continue to innovate by exploring creative solutions and seeking external funding opportunities. These resource limitations can serve as a catalyst for creativity and innovation, encouraging the exploration of alternative data collection methods and leveraging existing resources efficiently.

The study captured a snapshot of experiences at a specific moment in time, potentially missing the dynamic evolution of experiences over time. Black women's experiences at HWIs are influenced by changing institutional dynamics, policies, and broader societal shifts. To address this limitation, future research can embrace the temporal dimension as an opportunity for ongoing inquiry. Periodic follow-up studies or longitudinal research can be conducted to track and document changes in experiences over time, offering a more comprehensive view of the journey of Black women at HWIs.

Although these limitations are inherent to the study's context, they provide fertile ground for positive recommendations. Embracing complexity, deepening historical inquiry, celebrating diversity, innovating in resource constraints, and acknowledging the temporal dimension all contribute to a richer and more inclusive exploration of the experiences of undergraduate Black women at HWIs.

In the pursuit of revealing the unique experiences and perspectives of undergraduate Black women at HWIs, this research journey has been guided by the

empowering frameworks of BFT and EFE. As I reflected on the insights gained and the strides made in this study, it became apparent that my exploration was both a celebration of progress and a recognition of opportunities for further growth.

In this spirit, I offer a set of recommendations for future research endeavors, each grounded in the deliberate choices made for this study and poised to enrich understanding of the complex narratives woven by Black women in academia. These recommendations seek to expand the horizons of intersectionality, center marginalized voices, promote collaboration, deepen historical inquiry, and foster innovative research methodologies.

Future research should continue to celebrate the complexity of Black women's identities by delving even deeper into intersectionality, recognizing their experiences are shaped not only by race and gender but also by socioeconomic status, sexuality, and other intersecting factors. This approach will provide a more holistic understanding of how multiple dimensions of identity influence their experiences at HWIs. By amplifying these nuanced perspectives, research can contribute positively to the advancement of BFT and EFE.

Although existing research has amplified the voices of Black women, there is room for further growth in centering the experiences of those who are often marginalized in this group. Future research should deliberately seek out and elevate the voices of Black women with disabilities, LGBTQ+ Black women, and other underrepresented subgroups. This commitment to inclusivity aligns with the principles of both BFT and EFE, fostering a more comprehensive and empowering narrative.

To enrich the research process, future endeavors should prioritize collaboration and community engagement. Engaging with local communities and campus organizations

can provide valuable insights and establish a sense of shared ownership of the research. Embracing participatory action research and community-based approaches can ensure the study's findings directly benefit and empower the communities under investigation.

Building upon the historical context, future research can delve even deeper into the historical experiences of Black women at HWIs. It can investigate the historical context of the specific HWI under study, examining its racial and gender dynamics over time to understand how past events have shaped the experiences of Black women today. This process involves not only exploring institutional histories but also delving into personal narratives, oral histories, and archival materials that may reveal hidden stories. By doing so, research can provide a richer understanding of the historical forces that have shaped the present experiences of Black women.

Resource constraints can be reframed as opportunities for innovation. Future research can explore alternative data collection methods, such as digital ethnography, online surveys, or storytelling workshops, which can be cost effective and inclusive. These innovative approaches can yield diverse and valuable data sources, enriching the research process and ensuring that the study captures a wide spectrum of experiences.

Incorporating the tenets of BFT and EFE, the need for a more comprehensive exploration of the experiences of Black women at HWIs became evident. One promising avenue lies in the recommendation for a longitudinal study, aligning with the core principles of intersectionality championed by these frameworks. This approach would enable researchers to delve into the enduring effects of these experiences on the personal and professional journeys of Black women after graduation. By tracking their experiences

over time, this research can uncover evolving trends and changes in academic, social, and personal trajectories, shedding light on the dynamic nature of their encounters at HWIs.

In alignment with BFT and EFE, recognizing the resilience and agency of Black women is pivotal. Therefore, an essential recommendation is to delve into the coping strategies Black women employ to navigate the multifaceted pressures and challenges they encounter at HWIs. This investigation encompasses both individual and collective resilience-building approaches, aligning with the emphasis on community and solidarity in these frameworks. By unearthing and celebrating the strategies that empower Black women, research can amplify their voices and fortify their agency in the face of adversity.

Central to BFT and EFE is the acknowledgment of the broader societal context and the roles of individuals and institutions in it. To this end, I recommend future research explores the perspectives of faculty and staff at HWIs. This approach allows for an examination of their attitudes, pedagogical practices, and mentorship efforts in the context of supporting or hindering the experiences of Black women. By considering the roles of these stakeholders, research can foster a more holistic understanding of the institutional dynamics at play and the potential for transformation through inclusive pedagogical practices.

In line with the transformative goals of BFT and EFE, an imperative recommendation is the analysis of institutional policies and practices. By assessing the impact of these policies on the experiences of Black women, research can contribute to the ongoing conversation surrounding institutional change and reform. Investigating the effectiveness of diversity initiatives, student support services, and campus climate

interventions aligns with the frameworks' commitment to dismantling systemic inequalities and fostering inclusive environments.

Grounded in principles of empowerment and self-determination in BFT and EFE, I recommend future researchers engage Black women students as active participants and coresearchers in the research process. By encouraging their active involvement in shaping research questions, methodologies, and recommendations, research can amplify the voices of people directly impacted by the study. This approach not only strengthens the authenticity of the research but also empowers Black women to actively contribute to the narratives surrounding their experiences.

Prioritizing ethical well-being aligns with the foundational principles of respect and care in these frameworks. Therefore, I recommend future research implement trauma-informed research practices, offer resources for emotional support, and ensure informed consent throughout the research journey. By safeguarding the ethical and emotional well-being of participants, research aligns with the values of justice and equity espoused by BFT and EFE.

To provide a holistic understanding of the experiences of Black women at HWIs, fostering transdisciplinary collaborations is crucial. By drawing upon fields such as sociology, education, psychology, gender studies, and critical race theory, research can offer comprehensive insights. This approach aligns with the intersectional and multidimensional nature of the experiences of Black women, enriching the research process and findings through a diversity of perspectives.

Finally, adhering to the principles of social justice and advocacy inherent in BFT and EFE, research findings should be disseminated beyond academic circles.

Policymakers, institutional leaders, and advocacy organizations should also be informed to facilitate evidence-based policy changes and support tailored to the specific needs of Black women at HWIs. This approach ensures research actively contributes to dismantling systemic barriers and fosters positive change in institutions and society.

These recommendations collectively strive to propel research into a transformative realm. Their purpose extends beyond mere exploration, reaching toward the empowerment of Black women at HWIs. In alignment with the principles of equity and social justice, they aspire to challenge and dismantle systemic inequalities that have long persisted in higher education. The overarching goal is to contribute substantively to the development of equitable policies and practices in academia, fostering an inclusive environment where the voices and experiences of Black women are celebrated and influential in shaping the future of higher education.

Conclusion

HWIs have witnessed a growing diversification of their student populations, with Black undergraduate women representing a significant demographic (Carlton, 2023). Understanding the unique challenges and triumphs that shape their educational journey is imperative for fostering an environment where they can thrive academically, socially, and personally. Although I started this journey to highlight the success of undergraduate Black women as they matriculate on campuses that are predominantly white, my focus was on their academic encounters. However, the research and data led me to something else much deeper than just their ability to get through their classes. My research shed light on their plight to exist in these spaces, navigating the perilous hallways that were

not kind, but still being able to find something or someone that helped them begin to see themselves as if they belonged there.

The lived experiences of Black undergraduate women at HWIs provide valuable insights that can inform and transform institutional practices. By addressing challenges, fostering inclusion, and amplifying support systems, HWIs can pave the way for these women to not only succeed academically but also flourish as empowered leaders, shaping a more diverse and equitable future in academia and beyond.

Drawing from EFE, which asserts the importance of marginalized voices and perspectives in knowledge production, I sought to amplify the narratives of the sista scholars, elevating their voices in a landscape that often fails to acknowledge their unique challenges and contributions. Moreover, through the framework of BFT, I aimed to examine the intersecting oppressions Black women face as both race and gender come into play in the institutional setting. By embracing these critical perspectives, I hoped to not only expose the adverse effects of systemic biases but also advocate for meaningful and transformative changes in the academic realm, ensuring the experiences of Black undergraduate women are recognized, validated, and valued.

This study aimed to illuminate the intricacies of the lived experiences of undergraduate Black women at HWIs and provide insight into how they measured their own success. By embracing the theoretical frameworks of EFE and BFT, this study cast light on the challenges and potential pathways to success for this demographic. The narratives of community building, institutional support, and pressure to succeed underscored the resilience and agency of Black women in the face of adversity. The study of Black women at HWIs represented a critical avenue of research that illustrated the

multifaceted challenges, resilience, and untapped potential in this remarkable

demographic. These women navigated a complex intersection of race, gender, and

academic pursuits, often facing systemic inequalities and barriers that must be addressed.

To support their ability to thrive fully, there is an undeniable need for greater resources,

both in terms of research funding and institutional commitment. Such resources will not

only empower Black women to flourish in higher education but will also contribute to the

broader advancement of inclusive, equitable, and transformative academic environments

for all. In recognizing the unique struggles and triumphs of Black women at HWIs,

administrators take a significant step toward realizing a more just and equitable future in

higher education.

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APPENDIX A

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

Hello!

I am Wanda Johnson, a doctoral candidate under the direction of Dr. Ginny Jones Boss in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services in the College of Education at The University of Georgia. I am recruiting participants for my dissertation study about the experiences of Black women who attended historically white institutions (HWI) as undergraduates. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of Black women who attended HWIs. This study is significant because there is little research focusing on the lived experiences of undergraduate Black women and their perseverance. The intent is to position the findings from this study to amplify the voices and experiences of undergraduate Black women at HWIs and to better equip undergraduate faculty and staff in fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment that supports Black women in pursuit of an undergraduate degree at a historically white institution. This study has IRB approval.

Inclusion criteria are below:
- Identify as Black or African ascendant
- Identify as a woman
- Attend(ed) a historically white institution as an undergraduate
- Be at least 18 years of age

If you or someone you know meets the criteria for this study and are interested in being a part of the study, please click the following link to provide your information to the researcher: [Insert link].
Please contact me at xxxxx@email.edu if you have additional questions.
** Participants will have refreshments provided to them during the sista circle experience. **

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT FLYER

APPENDIX C

QUALTRICS CONSENT FORM

Researcher's Statement
My name is Wanda Johnson, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Counseling and Human Development at the University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research study entitled **Still, I Rise. . . Using Sista Circles to Explore the Lived Experiences of Black Women Who Attend(ed) Historically White Institutions As Undergraduates**. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator:	Dr. Ginny Jones Boss Department of Counseling and Human Development xxxxx@email.edu
Coinvestigator:	Wanda Johnson Department of Counseling and Human Development The University of Georgia xxxxx@email.edu (XXX) XXX-XXXX

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of Black women who attend(ed) a historically white institution as an undergraduate. I hope that the results of this study will improve campus environments, programs, and services for all students, and more specifically Black college women. You are being asked to participate because you are a Black college woman who attend(ed) a historically white institution as an undergraduate. To be included in this study, participants must:

- Identify as Black or African ascendant
- Identify as a woman
- Attend(ed) a historically White institution as an undergraduate
- Be at least 18 years of age

Study Procedures
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to . . .

- Complete a demographic survey (5 minutes)
- Participate in two audio and video recorded sista circles lasting 60–90 minutes with three to seven other students.

Risks and discomforts

All information obtained will be confidential and any subsequent documentation of the research will use pseudonyms; however, this research study has limited potential risks associated with participation. There is a slight psychological risk with revealing your experiences as a Black woman who attend(ed) an HWI as an undergraduate student. If you ask for additional support, I will refer you to the University Counseling Center and provide contact information for the Primary Investigator, Dr. Boss. You may choose not to answer any questions asked during the interviews or group talks that you are uncomfortable addressing. Additionally, you may withdraw from the study at any time.

Benefits

Possible personal benefit includes the opportunity to share and learn from fellow collegiate Black women. The results of this study may help to influence college and university practices to build more inclusive campus environments for all students, especially undergraduate Black college women.

Incentives for participation

There are no monetary or nonmonetary incentives for participating in this study.

Audio/Video Recording

I plan to audio and video record the sista circles to ensure that I appropriately and accurately capture your thoughts and experiences. All recorded and written data will be secured in my locked office and will be password protected on my computer. Upon completion of the research, the data will be transcribed and coded to avoid any individually identifiable information. The recordings will be kept by me for a maximum of one year, at which time they will be destroyed to maintain participant confidentiality.

Privacy/Confidentiality

All information obtained during the research study will be treated confidentially. Only the researcher will have access to specific identifiable information obtained through data collection. The sista circle data will not have your name associated with it. The data collected in this study will be coded to protect your confidentiality. I will replace your name with a pseudonym in the transcription of the focus group and I will not link the pseudonym to your actual name.

Even though I will emphasize to all sista scholars that comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential, sista scholars may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future.

Participants' privacy will be protected using coding in the data collection and transcription phases. The code key will be destroyed in 1 year after data collection has been completed.

The audio and video files and the transcriptions of the files will be stored in a password-protected folder on the UGA-secured cloud storage (OneDrive) to which only I have access. The project's research records may be reviewed by departments at the University of Georgia responsible for regulatory and research oversight. I 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.

Participation is Voluntary
Your involvement in the study is voluntary and 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 stop or withdraw from the study, the information/data collected from or about you up to the point of your withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed. Participant's personally identifiable information will be kept confidential. Participants will have the opportunity to select a pseudonym to protect their identity. I will have access to the protected information (e.g., personally identifiable information). Sensitive data will be kept safe on a password-protected computer in my possession. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or identifying information will not be used. The published results will be presented in summary form or represented with a pseudonym attachment only.

If you have questions
The main researcher conducting this study is Wanda Johnson, a doctoral student at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at xxxxx@email.edu or (XXX) XXX-XXXX or Dr. Ginny Jones Boss at xxxxx@email.edu. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to: The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 212 Tucker Hall, 310 East Campus Road, Athens, GA 30602; telephone (XXX) XXX-XXXX; email address: irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:
To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must indicate by selecting from the options listed. Your selection below indicates you have read or had read to you this entire consent form and have had all your questions answered.

- o **I consent to participate in the study and wish to continue with the study.**
- o **I do not consent to participate in the study. I do not wish to continue.**

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Wanda L. Johnson

APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Q1. First Name
- Open Response

Q2. Last Name
- Open Response

Q3. Nationality/Ethnicity (e.g., African American, Jamaican, Afro-Latinx Puerto Rican)
- Open Response

Q4. Undergraduate Institution
- Open Response

Q5. Undergraduate Program of Study (e.g., Biology, Mathematics, Computer Science)
- Open Response

Q6. Classification (Undergraduate or Graduate)
- Select one

Q7. Age
- Open Response

Q8. Email address (to confirm sista circle date)
- Open Response

Q9. Identities you would like to share with the researcher (e.g., sexuality, socioeconomic status, religious/spirituality/meaning making, gender identity, ability)
- Open Response

Q10. Chosen pseudonym for the study (If no pseudonym is selected, one will be assigned for the study)
- Open Response

Q11. Sista Circle availability (choose ALL that apply; your official date will be confirmed via email by the researcher)
- Select One: Tuesday at 6pm, Wednesday at 6pm, Thursday at 6pm, Other (please respond)

Q12. Do you have any allergies or dietary restrictions?

- Select one: Yes or No

Q13. If yes, please list allergies/dietary restrictions.
- Open Response

Q14. Is there any additional information you would like to share with the researcher?
- Open Response

APPENDIX E

SISTA CIRCLE PROTOCOL #1

Theme: Lived Experience
Centering Activity

Maya Angelou was quoted as saying, "We may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated." As a Black woman who attend(ed) a historically white institution as an undergraduate, what does this quote mean to you?

Sista Circle Prompts

1. What are the joys you have/had experienced as an undergraduate Black woman at an HWI?

2. What are the challenges you face(d) as an undergraduate Black woman?

3. How do you think the lived experience of undergraduate Black women differs from that of an undergraduate white woman?

4. Describe the level of campus and/or departmental support you are receiving or have received as an undergraduate Black woman.

5. Is there anything else you would like to share?

APPENDIX F

SISTA CIRCLE PROTOCOL #2

Theme: Support

Centering Activity

Maya Angelou was quoted as saying, "We may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated." As a Black woman who attended a historically white institution as an undergraduate, what does this quote mean to you?

Sista Circle Prompts

1. As an undergraduate Black woman at an HWI, who, what, or where are/were your main sources of support?

2. Who or what has contributed to your ability to sustain or endure the experiences of being a Black undergraduate woman at an HWI?

3. Do you feel undergraduate Black women need a unique type of support? Why?

4. If you could create some form of support for undergraduate Black women, what would it look like? What would be its key components or features?

5. Is there anything else you would like to share?

APPENDIX G

THANK YOU EMAIL TO SISTA SCHOLARS

Dear Sista Scholars,

I pen these words filled with profound gratitude, as I take a moment to acknowledge the remarkable journey we embarked upon together through Sista Circle Research. I extend my deepest appreciation for your courageous participation, unwavering support, and invaluable contributions to this transformative study. With heartfelt gratitude, I express my indebtedness to the profound impact each of you has had on the pursuit of knowledge in the realms of Endarkened Feminist Epistemology and Black Feminist Thought.

As researchers, we recognize that the voices and experiences of Black women have historically been silenced, marginalized, and erased in dominant frameworks of knowledge. It is in this oppressive context that Sista Circle Research was born, aiming to create spaces for your narratives, insights, and wisdom to flourish unapologetically. Guided by the principles of Endarkened Feminist Epistemology, I sought to center your lived experiences, reconfigure power dynamics, and challenge the status quo. My intention was to honor the multiplicity of your truths and amplify your voices in ways that foster empowerment and social change.

In the spirit of Black Feminist Thought, we embraced intersectionality and recognized the interconnectedness of race, gender, class, and other dimensions of identity in shaping your lives. Your willingness to share the complexities of your experiences has enriched our understanding of the diverse challenges faced by Black women, allowing us to challenge prevailing assumptions and craft nuanced frameworks for liberation and justice. Through your narratives, we were reminded of the strength, resilience, and wisdom that exist in your collective stories.

Your participation in the Sista Circle Research has not only advanced knowledge in feminist scholarship but has also paved the way for a more inclusive and equitable future. By sharing your personal narratives and perspectives, you have actively dismantled oppressive systems, enabling us to challenge dominant epistemologies and promote transformative change. Your courage and willingness to engage in critical dialogues have paved the way for greater understanding, empathy, and solidarity among diverse communities.

I also want to acknowledge the emotional labor and vulnerability required to engage in this research. Sharing personal experiences can be challenging and emotionally taxing, and I am profoundly grateful for your willingness to open your hearts and trust me as a

researcher. Your trust has been the foundation upon which this study has been built, and I assure you that I will continue to honor and respect your stories in all future work.

In closing, I extend my deepest gratitude to each participant of the Sista Circle Research. Your courage, resilience, and generosity have indelibly shaped the trajectory of this study, and I am forever grateful for the knowledge and insights you have shared. I hope that your contributions continue to reverberate, empowering generations of Black women and inspiring a more just and inclusive world.

With sincere appreciation,

Wanda L. Johnson

University of Georgia