BLACK WOMEN: COLLEGE EXPERIENCES AND ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

Limited research has been specifically dedicated to women generally and black women specifically and their college experience, yet today women consistently enroll in community colleges at a higher rate than men. To explore how black women engage in their college experiences, this descriptive phenomenological study examined the lived experience of black women, their gender racial identity in relation to the classroom or on-campus experiences, and how they engage academically.

As this study's focus was black women enrolled or recently enrolled at a community college, black feminist theory, intersectionality theory, identity centrality theory, and stereotype threat theory provided a theoretical backdrop. Metzner and Bean's nontraditional and commuter college student engagement model served as conceptual model to determine how traditional predictors to student persistence and success applies to black women enrolled in college. The purposive sample included ten black women who provided in depth narrative essays about how they developed their gendered racial identities and about their classroom or on-campus experiences. Also, they were engaged in two virtual interviews that inquired about their college experiences and academic engagement related to five factors including (1) background and external factors, (2) autonomy and self-determination, (3) academic supports, (4) faculty trust, and (5) student effort.

Three themes emerged from essay narratives related the research participants gendered racial identities related to their classroom or on-campus experiences including the (1)

use of stereotypes, (2) presence or lack of diversity, and (3) feeling of being dismissed. Three themes emerged from the interviews which were about their college experiences and academic engagement. Those themes were (1) letting go of baggage, (2) developing self-agency, and (3) navigating learning experiences.

KEY WORDS: black women, college experiences, academic engagement

DEDICATION

The impetus for the study came from student essays submitted to a state community college association on the topic of “how my community colleges have impacted my life.” The student essays represented the diversity of community college districts across the state, each with rich descriptions of personal journeys and academic engagement. This research is dedicated to the journey of all of those community college students.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Among black students enrolled at community colleges, black women's enrollment has consistently outpaced that of black males (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011), and black women enroll in community colleges at the same rate as women of other racial demographics (Walpole et al., 2014. Also, black women who enroll at community colleges, transfer, and complete a bachelor's degree are as likely as black men and other women to pursue a graduate degree (Walpole et al., 2014). However, according to Walpole et al. (2014), "the propensity of African American women to enroll in any college notwithstanding, African American women attending community colleges are less likely than their counterparts to complete the degree" (p. 155). Research has also found that parents of black women enrolled in community colleges have less education than parents of all other students, have an 11% gap in the completion of an associate's degree, and have an 8% gap in the completion of a bachelor's degree in comparison to other women students (Walpole et al., 2014).

Academic preparedness, remedial education requirements, financial stability, family roles, and affordable childcare are among a myriad of challenges facing community college students (Valadez, 2000). For black women particularly, "given their overexposure to failing elementary and secondary schools, their overrepresentation in the lowest socioeconomic quartile, their increased need to work, and their childcare responsibilities" (Walpole et al., 2014, p. 156), community colleges are challenged to provide an institutional culture ready to

support any student with these needs. According to Wood and Turner (2010), more often than not, black women enrolled at community colleges, particularly adult students, are single parents and employed in low wage-earning positions. Further, black community college students, both women and men, associated employment barriers to academic achievement. Black women consistently reported feelings of being unwelcomed and that the lack of student supports such as childcare and other services were more likely to result in their departure from their institution (Johnson, 2001). However, black women enrolled in community colleges found that family, spirituality, college environment, financial security (employment), and the pressure to succeed contributed to their retention and persistence (Johnson, 2001).

Well-known scholars such as Astin (1984, 1993b), Tinto (1987, 1993b), and Kuh (2003) all espoused that student engagement is critical to persistence and success. Given the challenges mentioned and barriers for black women including academic preparedness, financial stability, affordable and accessible childcare, it is reasonable to expect that community colleges that provide these critical support services would see greater engagement, persistence, and completion rates for black women. However, their persistence and success remain below their peers. Even further, black women who do not need these student support services drop out of college for other reasons, including frustration, demoralizing gender and racial experiences, and low self-esteem. Tinto (1997) asserted that in the case of high-performing, academically prepared black women who attend open-access colleges are at risk of departure. However, despite these challenges, black women who are managing multiple life priorities enroll in community colleges as they are a more affordable alternative to a university, offer greater

faculty-to-student interaction, offer short-term career paths to greater economic opportunities, and are generally close to home and work (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014).

RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE FOR RESEARCH STUDY

A preponderance of research studies on black community college students have been exclusively focused on black men (Esters & Mosby, 2007). Findings from research conducted on black men are often assumed to influence the same satisfactory or unsatisfactory college experience for black women. Cole and Guy-Sheftall (2003) stated that:

> The popular notion that Black men are an "endangered species" has given the impression that all is well with Black women…. This image of the endangered Black male, unfortunately, reinforces the belief that improving the status of Black men will single-handedly solve all the complex problems facing African American communities. (p. xxix)

Without further research on black women enrolled in community colleges, we devalue the external factors such as work, family commitments, racial and gender identities, and motivations for enrolling in college that distinguish success factors for black women (Strayhorn 2011a, 2012; Weis, 1985).

Research studies have found that black women and men experience college differently (Cuyjet, 2006; Fleming, 1983; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). Beyond gender, there are many others and a confluence of differentiating factors such as age, family commitments, spirituality, and desired outcomes and goals for enrolling that can contribute to why black women and black men experience college differently. According to Strayhorn & Johnson (2014), factors such as family, spirituality, and desired outcomes and goals for enrolling account for a 13% variance in college satisfaction between the black women and black men. Also, black women generally complete high school at a higher rate and score higher on standardized tests than black men,

and therefore black women are assumed to have better persistence and completion rates and are not prioritized as a high-risk population (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014).

STATEMENT OF THE PHENOMENON

Research studies explicitly focused on black women enrolled in college have been underrepresented in scholarly research and literature, yet they represent a significant proportion of overall black college student enrollment. This research will contribute and advance the focus on black women enrolled in college. Specifically, this research study's focus is to explore the lived experience of black women, their perspectives about gender racial identity, and their perspectives on how their gender racial identity insects with their college experiences and academic engagement.

OVERVIEW OF THE CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

To better understand the lived experience of black women enrolled in college, their gender racial identity and how it intersects with their academic engagement and overall college experience, this research study employed a student-engagement conceptual model and several theoretical frameworks.

Metzner and Bean's (1987) nontraditional and commuter college student engagement model considers background, environmental, and psychological variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, enrollment status, employment, family responsibilities, external support, goal commitment, and stress. Metzner and Bean (1987) included gender because there is an indirect negative correlation between external factors such as gender stereotypes, financial stability, family responsibilities, and employment. Also relevant to this research study, Metzner and Bean

(1987) included race and ethnicity as there was an assumed negative indirect correlation between GPA and low-performing high schools where many ethnic and racial minoritized populations are overly represented. Since the development of Metzner and Bean's (1987) model, other student engagement models have emerged that used attrition theory to explain student drop out as a result of external factors such as poor academic preparation, and socioeconomic reasons related to employment and family obligations (Schuetz, P. 2008) that are outside of the institution's control. However, Metzner and Bean's student engagement model was used as it holistically represented the broadest set of both external factors related to the student's environment and institutional factors relevant to the student's college experience that could impact student engagement for black women.

While many theoretical frameworks can be found in the literature, the four most relevant to the purpose of this research study were black feminism theory, intersectionality theory, identity centrality theory, and stereotype threat theory. Patricia Hill Collins, a notable scholar and academic, is most closely associated with black feminism. Specifically, Collins (2002) forwarded black feminist thought as a framework for examining the matrix of gender and racial domination and power that influence college experiences for black women. According to Collins (2002), using black feminist theory as a research study framework helps facilitate an understanding of the oppression and resistance through the lens of black women's self-definitions and reflections, intersecting identities, and activism.

Foundational to black feminism is intersectionality theory. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a legal scholar, is most notably associated with intersectionality theory. Intersectionality theory provides a framework for researchers to have "a critical analytical lens to interrogate racial,

ethnic, class, ability, age, sexuality and gender disparities and to contest existing ways of looking at these structures of inequities" (Thornton-Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 1). More recently, intersectionality theorists asserted that the use of a theoretical framework must consider multiple dimensions of identity categories such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, which have historically been used to oppress black women, otherwise it diminishes the whole black woman experience (Collins 1999a, 1999b; hooks, 1981, 1989; Zinn & Dill, 1996).

Many researchers have used Identity Centrality theory to examine subjects who belong to multiple identities, whether race and gender, family and work role identities, or other social identities. Identity Centrality theory is often used to examine discrepant normative behaviors between conflicting identities or moderating effects on the correlation between identity disruptions and psychological outcomes. Holmes et al. (2019) described student identity centrality as "the importance of being a student to a person's sense of self" and "is positively and significantly associated with college credits earned… academic confidence; college sense of belonging; and subjective well-being" (p. 1015). Sellers et al. (1998) found that a strong racial identity was positively associated with GPA for black students, and Sellers et al. (1997) found that black students who were enrolled in black study courses and socially integrated with same-race groups also had a positive influence on college GPA. However, Quinn and Chaudoir (2009) found that students who have strong racial and gender identity centrality but belong to gender and racial identities that have historically been stereotyped and stigmatized have demonstrated psychological distress. Thomas et al. (2011), Jackson (1998), and Settles (2006) posited that there are degrees of salience in identifying as a women and black and various strategies used to navigate gendered racial experiences.

Research using stereotype threat theory began in the 1990s and Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson are among the more notable researchers in this field. Stereotype threat research was used to examine the poor performance on standardized test among black freshman and sophomore college students where race was emphasized as a measurement factor (Stroessner & Good, 2011). Steel (2018) defined stereotype threat as “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (p. 253). According to Stroessner and Good (2011), research using stereotype threat theory “showed that performance in academic contexts can be harmed by the awareness that one's behavior might be viewed through the lens of racial stereotypes,” and “when one views oneself in terms of a salient group membership (e.g., "I am a woman. Women are not expected to be good at math.” and “This is a difficult math test."), performance can be undermined because of concerns about possibly confirming negative stereotypes about one's group” (pp. 1-2).

RESEARCH QUESTION

To guide this study, this primary research question examined:

- How does the lived experience of black women attending college influence their college experiences and academic engagement?

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Throughout this research, keywords and phrase are used that were grounded in the literature. The following are definitions of those keywords and phrases.

Adult students – a college student aged 25 and above

Appreciative inquiry – an individualistic positive reflection to challenge perspectives

Black – people of African or Afro-Caribbean decent

Black excellence – the recognition of the collective achievement and success of black people

Cultural competence – the awareness and respect of various cultural perspectives

Dis-identification – the disregard of academic feedback as indicative of academic abilities

Epoché approach – to release all forms of judgement

Growth mindset – an optimistic perspective to address and overcome challenges

HBCU – Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Imaginative variation – a conscious process of a researcher to examine multiple structural components of research subjects' descriptions of experiencing a phenomenon to determine stable structure of the experience

Internalized oppression – a person turning upon the identity groups they identify with distress patterns that result from racism and oppression of others

Minoritized – the subjugation to a subordinate status group

Nontraditional students – a college student aged 25 and above

PWI – Predominately White Institutions

Site college – The location where the research was conducted

Social racial attribution – the projected perceptions of behaviors and identities of a particular racial group

Traditional students – a college student between 18 to 24 years of age

DELIMITATIONS

This research study was conducted at a single institution and included ten research participants who were enrolled part-time and full-time, graduated, or stopped out from the institution. Eligibility to participate in this research study was limited to students who identified as female or woman and black or African American. Also, eligibility to participate was limited to those black women who were enrolled between the fall 2019 and spring 2022 semesters for at

least more than one semester. Finally, due to global pandemic health risks, all interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom.

DISSERTATION ORGANIZATION

Chapter One introduces the rationale and significance for the research study, statement of the phenomenon, an overview of the conceptual model and theoretical framework, the research question, definition of terms, limitations, delimitations, and this dissertation organization by chapters.

Chapter Two provides the student engagement conceptual model for this study, an overview of research on five factors that influence black women's college satisfaction and academic engagement. Also included is a summary of research studies about black women-gendered racial identities and coping strategies employed related to their classroom or on-campus experiences.

Chapter Three describes the statement of the phenomenon and research question, the research methodology, the data collection instrument and utilization, the research participant sample methodology, the data analysis, the validity and reliability methods, and limitations.

Chapter Four presents summary profiles of ten sampled participants and the themes that emerged from the data collection and analysis. Specifically, the themes that emerged were categorized around classroom or on-campus experiences as described in the essay narratives in the context of their gendered racial experiences. In part, their classroom or campus experiences were supported in their gendered racial experiences based on their background and external factors, one of the four factors that influence black women's college experiences and academic engagement. Secondly, themes were organized around data collected through the participant

interviews related to the remaining four categories of factors that influence black women's college experiences and academic engagement.

Chapter Five provides a discussion of the results and analysis in relation to literature review. Also, there is a discussion of the research implications and conclusions that includes recommendations for future research and my reflections.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Although between 2019-21 there was an overall decline in enrollment at community colleges among black students, black women enrolled in community colleges outpaced that of black men by 9 percentage points according to the national student clearinghouse May 26, 2022, report. Also, black women who start at a community college and complete a bachelor's degree are just as likely to enroll in a graduate program as black men and women generally. However, black women enrolled in community colleges are less likely to persist to graduation than black men (Walpole et al., 2014). Ebanks and Francois's (2022) study of black women enrolled at community colleges found that financial barriers, academic supports, and racism were factors that contributed to their attrition and eventual lack of persistence. The purpose of this literature review is to explore the limited research presently focused on black women enrolled in college, their experiences and academic engagement.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT MODELS

> Much of the theoretical work on college student success emanates from Tinto's (1993) interactionalist theory of college student departure. He suggests that several factors— background traits, initial commitments, academic and social integration, to name a few— interact and converge over time to affect student persistence. (Strayhorn 2011b, p. 440)

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and Astin (1993a) noted the significance of student engagement as a critical component of a student's development process relative to persistence. Adding to

the body of research on student engagement with even more specificity was Chickering and Gamson (1987). They highlighted seven components of successful student engagement: faculty-staff interactions, student learning, timely academic feedback, students' time on tasks, high faculty expectations, attention to diversity in teaching and learning excellence, and student cooperation.

However, most of the literature and research on student engagement have been conducted at four-year institutions. Further, the research conducted on student engagement at community colleges have primarily been focused broadly on minoritized students in general, or black and Latinx men, leaving women, particularly black women, to be referenced mostly as a comparison group or scantly represented as the focus in scholarly literature and research studies. The limited representation of black women as the focus of empirical research related to their college experiences devalues their lived experience.

To consider the unique experiences and backgrounds of community college students specifically, Metzner and Bean (1987) developed the nontraditional and commuter college student engagement model, which considers background, environmental, and psychological variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, enrollment status, employment, family responsibilities, external support, goal commitment, and stress. Metzner and Bean (1987) included gender because there is an indirect negative correlation between external factors such as gender stereotypes, financial stability, family responsibilities, and employment. Metzner and Bean (1987) also included race and ethnicity as there was an assumed negative indirect correlation between low-performing high schools, where many ethnic and racial minoritized populations are overly represented, and GPA.

The limited contemporary research has suggested that for black women in particular, college satisfaction and academic engagement are contingent on distinguishing factors based on background traits and their unique lived experiences as black women. For a deeper understanding of the lived experience of black women enrolled in college, an extensive review of the literature was conducted. This research study addresses components of student engagement models from the perspective of how black women engage in their college learning.

BLACK WOMEN ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT AND COLLEGE SATISFACTION RESEARCH

Research has shown that student engagement for black women and black men varies concerning their community college experiences (Cuyet 2006, Fleming 1983, Strayhorn and Terrel 2010). Further, Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) suggested that "findings from studies of black men at community colleges may not apply to black women" (p. 3). Together, these two research conclusions suggest that understanding the college experiences of black women is complex because of the gendered racial identities and worthy of exploration without comparison to black men. Also, according to Weis (1985) and Wood (2012 and 2013), other demographic factors such as age, socioeconomic status, and reasons for attending influence persistence among black women specifically. This portion of the literature review provides a summary of research that explores five factors specifically related to black women, their college experience and academic engagement. Those five factors include (1) background and external factors, (2) autonomy and self-determination, (3) academic supports, (4) faculty trust, and (5) student effort.

Background and External Factors

Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) conducted a quantitative analysis of 315 black women enrolled in community colleges to first understand the relationship between several background factors and satisfaction with their college experiences and to what degree background factors predicted satisfaction with their college experiences. The strongest predictors of satisfaction with college experience for black women were age, student-faculty engagement, grades, and family responsibilities (Strayhorn and Johnson 2014).

Age was the most significant predictor of satisfaction in that older black women were more satisfied with the college experiences than younger black women, which was the reverse for black men in Strayhorn's 2012 study. Faculty engagement was the second most substantial factor in predicting satisfaction with their college experience regardless of their background experiences. This finding is consistent with traditional student satisfaction models that assert student-faculty engagement positively influences student outcomes (Kuh et al., 2003; Kuh et al., 1991). Grades were also found to significantly influence black women's satisfaction with their community college experience. Finally, the higher the degree of conflict between family responsibilities and student effort, the less satisfaction with the community college experience was reported.

However, Strayhorn and Johnson's (2014) results found a 22% variance in the relationship between satisfaction with black women's community college experience and their backgrounds, leaving 78% of the variance unexplained. Based on the unexplained variance, Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) asserted that traditional models for understanding student satisfaction at community colleges are less applicable to black women. Future models should

include external factors such as self-efficacy or academic self-concept and students' perceptions of the campus climate, all supported in the literature as influencing community college satisfaction generally but may vary based on gender and racial differences (Downey, 2003; Morris & Daniel, 2008).

Autonomy and Self-Determination

In addition to the concepts of student engagement and student satisfaction, steeped in the scholarly literature are strong positive correlations between student integration and student persistence (Karp et al., 2008; Tinto, 1993a). However, as community colleges are primarily commuter colleges, academic and social integration has been debated as to its applicability at these predominantly two-year associate-degree granting institutions. More contemporary scholarly research on student engagement models for community colleges has included concepts and theories on student grit, self-determination, and intrinsic motivation. However, an extant review of the literature revealed that these concepts and theories have been criticized for not recognizing collectivist cultural norms aligned closely with racial and ethnic minoritized communities and overvaluing the idea of individualism which is closely aligned with white culture. Nonetheless, for community college students, “the classroom is the crossroads where social integration and the academic meet. If academic and social involvement or integration is to occur, it must occur in the classroom” (Tinto, 1997, p. 599).

Rose et al.’s (2014) research showed that women of color, including black women, attending community colleges demonstrated a strong sense of autonomy, independence, and self-determination in their academic and social engagement experiences. The following

vignettes were noted to demonstrate themes of autonomy and independence for women of color:

> If I see that I need help, then I will look at the textbook and review it myself. (p. 352)
>
> I studied for myself. I did it on my own, and I studied the textbooks and studied by myself to pass the class. (p. 352)
>
> To be honest, I'm my own advisor. I advise myself because nobody helps me… I just don't ask, and I figure it out myself. (p. 352)

To illustrate themes that are counter-narrative to traditional student engagement models that emphasize academic and social engagement, Rose et al. (2014) offered these community college vignettes to demonstrate women of color reservations about campus social activities:

> I feel like it's a lot like high school. There are a lot of groups and cliques that kind of stay to themselves…. So, I try to steer clear of that. And being here for such a short period of time, I've noticed there's a lot of unnecessary drama that follows having friends in class. It doesn't mix, because you tend to forget that you're here to learn and not to be with friends. For me, it's like, nothing has really changed from high school. (p. 352)
>
> I have acquaintances. I speak to people, I get along with it, for the sake of it. I mind my business; I don't start trouble. And I just keep moving; I don't have a clique. I didn't go to any clubs; I didn't join any. (p. 353)
>
> I'm not here to make friends, I mean, I do make friends while I'm in class, now. But I don't make friends that I hang out with. I guess because I need to do school right now, and because I'm not really here to make friends. (p. 353)

Gushue and Constantine (2003) also examined autonomy and independence but articulated in the form of cultural values as tenants of collectivism and individualism to create agency. They surveyed 123 traditional-aged black women attending a predominantly white institution (PWI) about their perceptions relative to their college experience. Gushue and Constantine used Triandis and Gelfand's (1998) framework of horizontal and vertical

collectivism and individualism. Triandis and Gelfand's (1998) definition of horizontal collectivism was that it emphasized the likeness between individuals, shared values, and independence of the whole in dependency of each group member and therefore resists authority. On the other hand, Triandis and Gelfand (1998) defined vertical collectivism with emphasizes on interdependence, shared values, and is more likely to accept authority. Horizontal individualism respects the distinctive characteristics of the person; however, those distinctive characteristics lend themselves to social order. Vertical individualism respects both the distinctive characteristics of a person and the social order.

Gushue and Constantine's (2003) research revealed three significant observations using these definitions. The first was that black women who demonstrated degrees of individualism also possessed a sense of feeling equal to others in their campus experiences. According to Utsey et al. (2000), black Americans generally lean toward collectivism. However, Gushue and Constantine's (2003) findings suggested that black women demonstrated horizontal individualism or bicultural tendencies, perhaps as a means for adapting to or reconciling their on-campus gendered racial experiences.

The second significant finding was that for black women who articulated their perspective leaning toward individualism as a healthy sense of self-identity, that identity was not overly reliant on the affirmation of that identity, and that valuing a strong sense of self-identity was associated with a decrease in the likeliness of social distancing or self-isolation. This finding is consistent with the definition of vertical individualism and conceivably reflects black women students' ability to ground themselves and guard their sense of independence. Finally, the study showed that black women who articulated perspectives of collectivism are

less inclined to demonstrate emotional volatility and reactivity. This finding is consistent with the definition of horizontal collectivism. It can conceivably be interpreted that the black women students who participated in Gushue and Constantine's (2003) study were solidly grounded in their self-identity and therefore expressed how they valued close relationships.

Finding implications of Gushue and Constantine's (2003) and Rose et al.'s (2014) studies seem to suggest that culturally prone responses associated with black women are complex and dependent on situational context and that perhaps in the case, having both individualistic and collectivistic dispositions are what afford adaptability when confronted with cultural conflicts on campus.

Academic Supports

Mau (2003) suggested that gender and race are significant factors in the recruitment and persistence of black women in career pathways dominated by men. According to Perna et al. (2009) and Strayhorn (2009), black women inequities found in STEM-related career pathways resulted from inadequate academic preparation in fundamental subject areas and the effect of unbalanced gender and racial representation in the classroom. Bensimon (2005) and Ortiz and Boyer (2003) noted that faculty cultural competence is critical in determining student outcomes for underrepresented racially minoritized students. Nicholls et al. (2007) found that in the case of academically prepared black students who dropped out of the STEM career program did so because of dissatisfaction with faculty and the lack of support for underrepresented and minoritized students who needed social and academic supports. Maton and Hrabowski (2004) asserted that faculty who consistently maintain high academic standards and provide sources of academic support, such as access to culturally representative

professional networks, mentoring, and culturally sensitive andragogy, could help address the inequities for black women apparent in the academic career professions dominated by men.

Jackson's (2013) study of black women formerly enrolled at community colleges who were enrolled at an historically black college and university (HBCU) in a STEM bachelor's degree program revealed that cultural self-identity was important to exploring STEM degree-related programs as well as developing a STEM identity in a career field that is typically dominated by men. Engagement with faculty and staff from both the community colleges and HBCUs attended were noted as significant factors that contributed to their recruitment and retention (Jackson 2013). Transferring between educational institutions and adjusting to the transfer-in institution have been particularly stressful for students who belong to underrepresented populations (Ong et al., 2011). Jackson (2013) also found that black women who previously attended community college and enrolled at an HBCU in STEM programs noted consistent messaging from their community colleges as a positive factor for transfer. The HBCU helped reduce anxiety about transfer and made the transition more successful, particularly around academic expectations and requirements.

Faculty Trust

McClain and Cokley (2017) studied gender differences among black university students as it relates to the degree that faculty trust has an impact on black students' academic self-concept (ASC), perception of their academic abilities, and whether they "disregarded academic feedback as indicative of their true academic abilities" (p. 127), termed *dis-identification*. There was a higher degree of relationship between perception of academic abilities and GPA for black women than it was for black men (Cokley, 2002; Cokley et al., 2012; McClain & Cokley, 2017),

which was attributed to the degree of faculty trust among black women (McClain & Cokley, 2017). Cole and Griffin (2013) suggested that the interpersonal relationship between students and faculty, essential to positive academic outcomes, is particularly challenged when black students do not trust their instructors. Romero's (2015) and Yeager et al.'s (2014) research found that improved academic outcomes can be attributed to greater trust between the student and their instructor. The degree of faculty trust and its relationship to academic self-concept and GPA among black women university students is consistent with Strayhorn and Johnson's (2014) finding that for black women community college students, meaningful engagement with faculty has a different influence on their academic performance than for black men.

Considering McClain and Cokely's (2017) findings that the degree of salience between academic self-concept and GPA; the extent of influence that trust of faculty has on academic self-concept and GPA; and the likeliness to trust and consider academic feedback for black women in comparison to black men; future research should consider the distinctive characteristics of black women such as autonomy, independence, and motivation and the role they play in navigating potential barriers to academic performance. Further, research that assesses colleges' student engagement models for minoritized and underrepresented populations could unveil potential gaps in student resources or advance in-class andragogy that leverage the strengths of black women.

Student Effort

Sontam and Gabriel (2012) examined gender and racial differences against six benchmarks of student engagement: (1) active and collaborative learning, (2) student effort, (3)

academic challenge, (4) student-faculty interaction, (5) support for learners, and (6) student GPAs. Their research revealed that, in general, black community college students, both women and men, demonstrated greater student engagement in terms of student effort and academic challenge than other races and ethnicities. However, more student effort did not significantly impact their academic outcomes as measured in their GPAs. However, black women's engagement and effort proved to have a relationship to higher GPAs when compared to black men. This means that although student effort for black women was found to result in higher GPAs compared to black men, overall, when compared to other races, greater student effort does not necessarily equate to higher GPAs.

According to Steel (2017), "merit has multiple definitions but when used in education it is typically centered around being rewarded for talent, ability, and effort." However, the underlying assumption of meritocracy is that there is equal opportunity for success constructed on an individual's abilities and effort (Au, 2016). In the context of this study and examining black women enrolled in a community college, the most obvious example of merit are placement exams. However, in examining black women college students, merit can also be assessed based on social definitions of their identities as a relationship to their ability and efforts as measured by placement exams and institutional characteristics and climate (Porter, 2017). This means that placement exams that determine enrollment in remedial courses, the lack of academic supports, and stereotypes of black women can have deleterious effect on black women academic self-concept and therefore student effort. To that end, Porter (2017) developed an identity development model to assess and explore the black women college experience that included background and external factors such as familial influence and gender

racial identity socialization as well as college integration and meeting often unspoken institutional standards of an engaged student. According to Steele (2017), these factors are critical to understanding motivation and definitions of success among black women enrolled in college. Therefore, when examining merit within a higher education context conjoined must be the idea of how merit contradicts black women's social and cultural factors (Steele 2017).

In summary, student engagement research related to five factors that influence college satisfaction and academic engagement included (1) background traits and external factors, (2) autonomy and self-determination, (3) faculty trust, (4) academic supports, and (5) student effort relative to black women experiences identified several differentiating factors. Specifically, there are differences in black women's academic engagement in comparison to black men and to white women, as well as notable distinctions in background traits among other black women. Table 1 is a summary of those notable distinctions in factors that influenced college satisfaction and academic engagement.

According to Strayhorn and Johnson (2014), background traits and external factors such as age and family responsibilities accounted for variances in student engagement among black women. Rose et al.'s (2014) research on women of color, including black women, found counter-narrative themes to traditional student engagement models that posited academic and social engagement as critical to student persistence. Their research found that women of color demonstrated a strong sense of autonomy and self-determination. This was consistent with Gushe and Constantine's (2003) research that found black women specifically expressed degrees of individualism and collectivism that suggested complexity and adaptability in dealing

with cultural conflicts that do not align with their cultural norms while engaging with fellow students and faculty.

Table 1. Notable Distinctions in Factors that Influenced College Satisfaction and Academic Engagement

FIVE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE COLLEGE SATISFACTION AND ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT	NOTABLE DISTINCTIONS
Background and external factors	Age and family responsibilities accounted for variances in student engagement among black women college students.
Autonomy and self-determination	Strong sense of autonomy and self-determination and degrees of both individualism and collectivism in dealing with cultural conflicts on campus that do not align with their cultural norms
Faculty trust	Academic self-concept and GPA had a positive effect on academic performance Academic self-concept and GPA were not significantly impacted by the degree of faculty trust Higher degrees of faculty trust and openness to academic feedback
Academic supports	Cultural self-identity and career identity in fields that are typically male-dominated were essential to academic exploration Faculty and staff engagement were significant factors that contributed to retention and transfer.
Student effort	Greater student engagement and effort do not have a significant impact on academic outcomes. Higher degrees of engagement and effort had a positive relationship to higher GPAs when compared to black male students Student merit and therefore effort is effected by student background and external factors as well as socialized identities that may conflict with institutional characteristics and climate

Bensimon (2005) and Ortiz and Boyer (2003) noted that academic supports in the form of faculty cultural competence is critical in determining student outcomes for

underrepresented racially minoritized students. Nicholls et al. (2007) found that even some academically prepared students who dropped out did so because of the lack of support for underrepresented and minoritized students who needed social and academic supports. Maton and Hrabowski (2004) asserted that sources of academic support, such as access to culturally representative professional networks, mentoring, and culturally sensitive andragogy, could help address the inequities for black women.

McClain and Cokely (2017) found that black women's academic self-concept and GPA has a positive effect on academic performance; that academic self-concept and GPA were not significantly impacted by the degree of faculty trust; and that black women were more likely to trust and consider academic feedback than black men. Jackson (2013) found that cultural self-identity was essential to academic exploration, to career identity in career field typically dominated by men, and that faculty and staff engagement were significant factors that contributed to retention and transfer for black women. Sontam and Gabriel (2012) found that for both black women and men greater student engagement and effort does not significantly impact their academic outcomes compared to other racial demographics. However, for black women who reported higher degrees of engagement and effort there was a positive relationship to higher GPAs when compared to black men.

These collective research findings demonstrate the unique ways that black women engage in their learning. Further research on the lived experience of black women can reveal an even deeper understanding of successful student engagement strategies not only for black women specifically but for student engagement practices more broadly.

Gendered Racial Experiences

Essed (1991) and Thomas et al. (2008) described the intersections of sexism and racism experienced by black women as gendered racism. Crenshaw (1989), one of the most notable legal scholars associated with intersectionality theory, espoused that black women can experience sexism and racism on a variety of dimensions, meaning based singularly on either gender or race; in an additive dimension, meaning separately and compounding; and in an intersection form of discrimination, meaning both based on gender and race. Most of the literature on black women and discrimination examines this phenomenon on a single axis or additive basis; however, the intersection of gendered racial experiences of discrimination most fully examines the lived experience of women of color, particularly that of black women (Szymanski & Lewis, 2016).

The intersection of gender and racial identities and any real or perceived discrimination resulting from those identities can create inimitable and compounding psychological distress (Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Woods-Giscombe & Lobel, 2008). Studies have demonstrated how coping strategies have been determined to increase psychological distress for black women in the form of detachment from social supports and resources. It also can create a sense of powerlessness in successfully resolving the experience and can result in internalization and self-blame for the experience (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). However, studies have also demonstrated how race-related stressors have positively influenced coping mechanisms associated with problem-solving skills, navigating race-related stressors, and helped to develop personal agency to deal with race-related stressors through education advocacy (Everett et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2013; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Utsey et al., 2000). Ideally, college campuses allow students to

increase their self-awareness, self-esteem, and confidence through classroom intellectual engagement, diversity campus programming and initiatives, and student clubs tailored to promote cultural pride and significance. As much as community colleges trend more racially and ethnically diverse than four-year institutions, they offer a rich backdrop for further research on black women and their college experiences.

Gendered Racial Identity and Self-Concept

Robinson et al. (2013) studied seven black women undergraduates between 18- to 25-years old to better understand to what degree gender and race were a part of forming their student identities, to identify what myths about black women were considered offensive and or replaced from their perspectives, and to determine what learning strategies they used to navigate their college experiences. What emerged from this research were two themes: Being the only one and black women's strength. Consistent with the first theme, the only one, when deciding whether to participate and speak during class, participants articulated a common subtheme: feeling an obligation to speak for themselves and all other black women. These feelings were in part associated with a positive responsibility that underpinned the study's participants' reasoning to study hard, speak with authority, and command respect. This study also revealed that being the only one had negative connotations, meaning the feeling of inconvenience to speak on behalf of those whom they may represent and that the pressure to outperform stemmed from the double standard placed on them as black women. Together, this was considered unduly burdensome, causing internalized group oppression in some cases.

Lipsky (1987) described internalized oppression as "the turning upon ourselves, upon our families, and upon our own people the distress patterns that result from racism and

oppression of the majority society" and the "narrow[ing] and limiting view of what is 'authentic' Black culture and behavior" (pp. 145-146). Robinson et al. (2013) offered this subject's comments to demonstrate her feelings to speak on behalf of the black race and her feelings of internalized oppression toward other black women who preferred to remain silent.

> I may not be the only person that's black in the class BUT I think that I'm the only person that knows that I'm black in my class. No, there are a lot of black women in communication [classes] that are black, but they don't know it. I think they see it but sometimes it loses, it leaves them because they start to believe that they're white. Even they'll look at me like when you have the question: Why do black women da-da-da-da? It will instantly be all eyes on me – [and I'm] like, are you serious, can you not answer the question? So, I always feel that whatever I say in that class, it's like I'm representing the black race. (pp. 62-63)

Robinson et al. (2013) noted that silence or avoidance might be a coping strategy based on past gendered racial experiences. They also found that study participants associated being the only one to having a responsibility to reject denigrating stereotypes of black women as overly confrontational, angry, and intellectually inferior by projecting confidence, being well-informed and prepared, and speaking from a personal and more collective perspective.

Under the second theme, black women strength, participants in the study expressed a positive self-definition in that despite the social and cultural barriers experienced in their personal, academic, and professional lives, black women persevere and are resilient. According to Robinson et al. (2013), the positive image of the strong black woman was embedded in black activism and was expressed in the sensibility of white womenness. Collins (1986) and Tatum (2017) asserted that subcultures that understand, participate, and balance the dominant culture with their own are survival tactics to succeed and thrive in the dominant culture environment, whether in the classroom or at work. However, some of these perceived positive self-definitions are embedded in the historically sexist and racist assumptions that black women

are innately strong and perceived to rarely need support, and therefore it is harmful should it prevent black women from asking for help when they need support and care (Hooks, 1991). Even further, scholars such as Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2003, 2007, 2009), Collins (2004), Woods-Giscombre (2010), and Wyatt (2008) have asserted that the self-definition characteristics of the strong black woman can manifest themselves in health and stress-related implications, damaged relationships, and disrupted career progression. Robinson et al. (2013) also found that participants expressed rejection of the strong black woman image and redefined the strong black woman as a complex, unique woman who preserves the right to self-discovery of an unexamined gendered racial identity that is still a strong black woman.

Several contemporary scholars' research has demonstrated how a gendered racial self-concept is consistently articulated by black women when describing their experiences on college campuses. Thomas et al. (2011) found that when black women were asked to describe their experiences separately as a woman, as a black person, and then as a black woman, they consistently articulated their responses to each of the questions from a gendered racial identity self-concept, suggesting a high degree of salience to the intersection of race and gender in their identity. Jackson (1998) noted that the 135 black women included in their study articulated their college experiences as complex and required daily conscious efforts to navigate their interconnected identities as being women and as being black. Settles (2006) examined the experiences of 89 black women in college and noted that even the positive sense of being a strong black woman was associated with the negative social status typically assigned to black women by the dominant culture. Shorter-Gooden and Washington (1996) studied 17 black women who also associated the value of the interconnection of their gender and race, but

rather as a source of strength within black women's self-definition and described them to have a strong psychological disposition and as better equipped to cope with gendered racial discrimination while on campus.

Shorter-Gooden and Washington's (1996) study measured the role gender and race played in forming their whole identities and found that racial identity was the most salient and a positive variable to self-identity. Their research also found that gender identity was most often discussed as an extension of racial identity, and gender identity was described in more ambiguous terms and therefore considered less salient than racial identity. Shorter-Gooden and Washington (1996) also found reoccurring references to strength in racial and gender identities for black women and, as evidence, offered these quotes:

> The strength is very important because it lets me define who I am and with strength I don't get lost in other people. I think it's important to have strength in order to have a true identity because if you don't, sometimes you can get caught up in relationships and lose yourself in them. (p. 470)

> You're stronger because you're black, because you have to struggle constantly because you're different. You have to be better than the best. You have to work harder to be the best that you can be and that's it. (p. 470)

Finally, Shorter-Gooden and Washington's (1996) research found that interpersonal relationships, mostly with other women and the community, are significant parts of black women's student identity. The connectedness theme aligned with other research (Miller, 1991) on black women and the importance of communalism in their identity development and its significance in meaning for people of African descent (Akbar, 1989; Myers, 1993).

Szymanski and Lewis (2016) studied 212 black women attending college to better understand their coping strategies in dealing with discrimination and how gendered racism influences their psychological health. Their research also sought to understand better the moderating effect of gendered racial identity centrality or the degree to which identifying as a black woman is attached to their self-concept as a means of dealing with discrimination. Their research found that increased experiences of gendered racism were related to higher levels of detachment from others and the discriminatory event and internalized oppression by blaming themselves, both leading to a decline in their psychological health. The research also found no difference in the frequency of gendered racism experiences and their coping strategies for black women who, to a lesser degree, attach their self-concept to their racial and gender identity.

Further, Szymanski, and Lewis (2016) found that black women who have a lower degree of attachment of their self-concept to their racial and gender identities may be less likely to perceive gendered racism as a stressor in their everyday lives. However, black women who have a high degree of attachment of their self-concept to their gender and racial identities may use various coping strategies concerning the frequency of their gendered racism experiences.

Lewis et al. (2013) studied gendered racial micro-aggressions among 17 black women college students and found five specific coping strategies that included two resistance strategies: to address micro-aggressions at the point they occur directly or to avoid future oppressive situations and standards. However, these resistance strategies can have negative implications such as being viewed as the “angry black woman, which is in itself a gendered racial micro-aggression” (p. 61), thus putting black women in a position of deciding whether to

address the micro-aggression and deciding which form of coping strategies is most advantageous to her (Lewis et al., 2013).

The third coping strategy for black women was a collective strategy involving a support network. Lewis et al. (2013) found that black women college students sought support from those who shared similar experiences as college students, but others leaned on supports outside of academe, whether through involvement in their community or other external social networks. This is consistent with Shorter-Gooden and Washington's (1996) research that found interpersonal relationships are significant parts of black women's identity and Miller's (1991) research that found the importance and significance of communalism in identity development for black women.

The final two coping strategies were self-protective strategies and passive tactics to mitigate the collective effect of gendered micro-aggressions. These two coping strategies are exemplified through identification as being able to withstand an inordinate amount of adversity, or the strong black woman*,* and desensitizing and escaping the micro-aggression. Lewis et al. (2013) stated that:

> The strong black woman strategy as a form of coping is unique to the sociocultural and historical experiences of Black women and has embodied the notions of independence, strength, and self-reliance as a way to maintain agency in the face of environmental barriers based on gender and race. It also represents a strategy whereby Black women try to protect themselves by redefining the negative stereotypes projected onto them from the dominant society by trying to show that they are capable of persevering in the face of adversity. (p. 64)

This finding is consistent with Robinson et al.'s (2013) research which posited that some of these perceived positive self-definitions are embedded in the historically sexist and racist assumptions that black women are innately strong and perceived to rarely need support. Lewis

et al. (2013) described desensitizing and escaping the micro-aggression as acknowledging the micro-aggression and deciding to resolve the situation to minimize its harmful effects passively. Lewis et al. (2013) offered this black women college student's quote to illustrate desensitizing and escaping coping strategy:

> I don't want to necessarily say I'm desensitized to all of the isms that you see, but I just, they kinda roll off me now, which, I don't necessarily think is a good thing though… but it is something that I've definitely done and I will say that in doing that I also kept myself sane… and I think that because I relied so much on outside networks, outside of here with friends and family, I never really did get angry. (p. 64)

Lewis et al. (2013) concluded that black women employed various degrees of coping strategies contingent on the circumstance and context of their experience with micro-aggressions. Lewis et al.'s (2013) findings are additive to Szymanski and Lewis's (2016) findings that black women's coping strategies were concerning the frequency of their gendered racism experiences, and Jackson's (1998) finding that black women made daily conscious efforts to navigate their interconnected identities as being women and as being black.

SUMMARY

Traditional student engagement models have neglected to reflect the experience of community college students in general. Also, they are void of factors specific to black women having gendered racial identities that have historically stereotyped associations, family responsibility, and financial situation and how these factors affect their student engagement and satisfaction. Even more, contemporary scholarly research of student engagement models that reflect the experience of community college student profiles does not focus on black women's experiences and assumes research conducted on black men or women in general is somehow universally applicable to all black women. Further, the scholarly research that

compares black women to other student demographics has demonstrated notable differences in student engagement between black women and black men and white women, as well as differences in engagement among their gender and racial demographic based on particular background traits and external factors. The unique lived experience of black women belonging to multiple underrepresented and minoritized populations, and the limited scholarly research that examines their experience as college students, merits further research to examine how colleges can better support black women.

Scholarly research on black women enrolled in college and their gendered racial identities has found that having multiple identities associated with underrepresented populations and navigating gendered racial discrimination and micro-aggressions, whether real or perceived, can have or lead to imitable and compounding psychological harm and distress. These gendered racial experiences have been conveyed through detachment from sources of student engagement and other social supports, dis-identification, disregard of academic and faculty feedback, and internalized oppressive behaviors that are harmful to self and other black women. Some of the self-protective coping strategies that black women employ, such as the strong black woman, can have negative consequences and perpetuate negative stereotypes such as the angry black woman. Regardless of which coping strategies black women employ to navigate gendered racial experiences, the delicate dance of deciding whether to respond to these situations and establishing identity salience in the context of the circumstance are protective measures that require psychological energy in addition to being an academically engaged college student.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

This study used a qualitative research methodology to examine the lived experience of black women enrolled in college and how their gendered racial experiences influence their college experiences and academic engagement. A descriptive phenomenological approach to the qualitative research methodology was employed to obtain descriptive narratives and derive themes found in written essays and interviews that helped to provide a rich set of data to analyze and give voice to black women's lived experience.

This chapter begins with the statement of the phenomenon and research question. Then, based on a review of the literature, the data collection and methods are explained, followed by a description of the research participant sampling method and the data analysis process used. Finally, the methods for ensuring the validity and reliability of the research findings are discussed, and the research study limitations are explored.

STATEMENT OF THE PHENOMENON AND RESEARCH QUESTION

To guide this study, the primary research question was:

- How does the lived experience of black women attending college influence their college experiences and academic engagement?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is defined as a study in and about the "human experience, perceptions, motivation and behaviors" (Clissett 2008, p. 100). According to Eisner (1997),

> for humans, meaning matters and values and intentions count. Humans live in a contingent world and form purposes that shift and alter depending on the meanings those contingencies have fostered. Indeed . . . constructivism has increased in saliency as a way to understand how humans made sense of the world. (p. 260)

There are three primary emphases for qualitative researchers: first, to provide context for the analysis; second, to understand observed phenomena; and finally, to explain the subjects' experiences (Wu & Wu, 2011). Eisner (1997) explained qualitative research as a means "to secure more authentic information about the people and situations studied" (p. 259). Qualitative research honors the particular context of individualism, oral storytelling, and meanings of the research participants as defined by their experience. Eisner (1997) outlined two key primary benefits of qualitative research: first, it allows the researcher to explore unexamined assumptions in human behavior; and second, storytelling provides the rich context that explains human behavior. However, Eisner (1997) also noted criticisms of qualitative research, including the ambiguity of storytelling, the indefensible conclusions drawn from such, and the inescapable subjectivity of the researcher on the research findings. The purpose of this research is not to provide generalizable findings but rather to explore meanings, perceptions, and behaviors from the lived experiences of black women attending college.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

Like the definition of qualitative research, a phenomenological approach to a qualitative research study has developed over the years and varies among scholarly disciplines, such as

philosophy and social sciences, according to Giorgi (2010). For this study, a phenomenological approach is defined as an "examination of the participant's lifeworld; [and because] it attempts to explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an object or an event" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 51).

At the center of phenomenology research "is a need to understand a phenomenon from the point of view of the lived experience in order to discover the meaning of it" (Englander, 2012, pp. 16-17). To arrive at the most authentic meaning of the phenomenon, the researcher must first obtain an adequate description of the phenomenon, and secondly, systematically separate everything nonessential, which is referred to as "reduction" (Girorgi, 1985). Essential to any phenomenological research design is thematizing the research subjects' meanings of the experiences relevant to the phenomenon (Sundler et al., 2019).

More specifically, this research study employed a descriptive phenomenology approach. Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), a German philosopher and mathematician widely credited with descriptive phenomenology, sought to bring rigor and an unbiased approach to qualitative research in understanding the human experience without applying a theory or interpretation from the researcher (Fochtman, 2008; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Wojnar & Swanson 2007). Husserl (1970) believed that fundamental to phenomenological research is how the researcher and research participants are involved in the lifeworld and our conscious descriptions of the worlds we live in, which are our experiences in our backgrounds. In a descriptive phenomenological research study, the research subjects' reflections and meanings given to their experience with the phenomenon is the primary focus, and "it is through thematized verbalization of this reflected experience that we gain access to the thing experienced" (Bevan, 2014 p. 137).

The core tenant and method of a descriptive phenomenological approach is the researcher's data collection methods, specifically interview and analysis of the data. According to Bevan (2014), interviewing is a systematic approach focused on the accurate description and a thematic analysis of the research subject's experience through contextualizing, apprehending, and clarifying the phenomenon being studied. The literature on phenomenological interviewing is widely debated and indeterminate related to how structured or flexible the interviewing methodology should be to ensure a thorough inquiry and accurate reflection of the subject's experience of the phenomenon. Bevan (2014) advanced an interview model that allows the researcher the flexibility to capture research data that is most reflective of the natural state of the subjects' experience and in a structure that facilitates a disciplined approach. Bevan's (2014) recommended structure of phenomenological interviewing is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Phenomenological Reduction (Epoché) Interview Structure

Researcher Approach	Interview Structure	Method	Example Question
Acceptance of natural attitude of participants	Contextualization (Eliciting the lifeworld in natural attitude)	Descriptive/Narrative context questions	"Tell me about becoming ill," or "Tell me how you came to be at the satellite unit."
Reflective critical dialogue with self	Apprehending the phenomenon (modes of appearing in natural attitude)	Descriptive and structural questions of modes of appearing	"Tell me about your typical day at the satellite unit," or "Tell me what you do to get ready for dialysis."
Active listening	Clarifying the phenomenon	Imaginative variation: varying of structure questions	"Describe how the unit experience would change if a doctor was present at all times."

Source: Bevan, M. T. (2014), p. 139.

The interview structure has three core domains in a phenomenological research study: contextualizing, apprehending, and clarifying the phenomenon. Seidman (2006) explained contextualizing as the responsibility of the researcher "to put the participant's experience in context by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time" (p. 17). Sokolowski (2000) suggested that apprehending a phenomenon through interviewing reveals the various ways that a phenomenon is experienced, how it manifests itself in the lifeworld, and should reflect the perspective of the research participants. Bevan (2014) suggested that this is accomplished by asking multiple questions about specific experiences related to the phenomenon and asking multiple research participants. Ihde (2009) described clarifying, or what is termed *imaginative variation,* as understanding and describing the experience of the phenomenon as a stable structure despite the multiple ways it manifests itself to the research participants. The phenomenological attitude and the researcher's approach, according to Zaner (1975), is an *epoché* approach to the interview, meaning a position of continual learning, and that the researcher is to critically challenge themselves to bracket and reduce their knowledge and suppositions through a reflective and conscious process. Although phenomenological researchers have debated whether clarifying the phenomenon should happen during the interview phase or the analysis phase, Bevan (2014) sided with Husserl (2012) and argued that applying imaginative variation during the interview phase is an active method for validating each research subject's experience and assigned meanings as entirely whole unto itself. As described by Husserl (2013), imaginative variation is a conscious process on the researcher's part to examine multiple structural components of the research subject's description of the experience to determine unalterable parts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Several theoretical frameworks were employed in the research literature that focused on the lived experience of black women and their multiple identities associated within gender, racial, and other minoritized contexts. However, the following discussion reflects a cascading perspective of theoretical frameworks most relevant to this study, including black feminist theory, intersectionality theory, identity centrality theory, and stereotype threat theory. These four theoretical frameworks were a means for understanding the lived experience of black women and, more specifically, how black women engage in their academics, navigate their campus social climate, and develop strategies for academic success.

BLACK FEMINIST THEORY

Patricia Hill Collins is a notable scholar and academic and is closely associated with the emergence of black feminism, which gained prominence in the 1970s after two significant social activist movements — the civil rights movement and the feminist movement of the 1960-70s — both neglected the specific experience of black women and other women of color (Collins 2000). Salzman (2006) suggested that:

> Black feminists have resisted for generations the separatism of their white feminist counterparts who have not traditionally included racism and classism as part of the women's rights agenda while simultaneously questioning the patriarchal beliefs to their African-American male leaders who often choose to ignore sexism in the fight for racial justice. (p. 758)

Further, Salzman (2006) believed that the fight against sexism, racism, and classism is a social justice fight for everyone and should not be the fight of black women exclusively. According to Collins (2000), using black feminist theory as a research study framework helps to understand

oppression and resistance through the lens of black women's self-definition and reflections, intersecting identities, and activism.

As noted earlier, Essed (1991) and Thomas et al. (2008) described the intersections of sexism and racism experienced by black women as *gendered racism*. In Thomas et al.'s (2011) study, Jackson's (1998a) study, and Settles's (2006) study, there are degrees of salience in identifying as a women and black and various coping strategies used to navigate gendered racial experiences that have both positive and negative implications on the overall health of black women college students.

Two notable studies measured and assessed gendered racial experiences of black women enrolled in college. First, Brown et al. (2017) employed a quantitative gendered-racial socialization scale to identify and measure gender and racial meanings. Black women internalize as a part of their families and social communities growing up on several domains including academic success, family roles and responsibilities, autonomy and self-advocacy, and gender racial dignity. The second is Lewis and Neville's (2015) study utilizing a quantitative but gendered racial micro-aggressions scale that examined the impact of projected stereotypes and micro-aggressions that marginalize and silence black women. Both Brown et al.'s (2017) and Lewis and Neville's (2015) research found that gendered racial experiences contributed to psychological distress for black women, whether real or perceived. According to Winkle-Wagner (2015), black women can experience these micro-aggressions from other students and faculty in the classroom and from staff in accessing campus student support services.

Inasmuch as there is limited research on the black women college student experience, there are even more limited studies that acknowledge or consider the multiple identities and

the impact of the subsequent oppressions that black women experience while on college campuses. Using the black feminist theory framework and understanding the history of acts of oppression and resistance through the lens of their experience, self-definitions and reflections, intersecting identities, and activism, this study helps to advance and bring attention to the lived experience of black women through their stories and narratives that give voice to their journey.

INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY

Research studies focused on the racial and gender identity of women of color have, for the most part, examined distinctly unique definitions of each identity rather than examining as inseparable identities. Foundational to black feminist theory is the concept of intersectionality as a means for holistically understanding the lived experience of black women. Their experience is not exclusively identified as being black, nor exclusively identified as being women, but rather as identified as belonging to multiple oppressed identities simultaneously. Kimberly W. Crenshaw is a legal scholar and academic notably associated with intersectionality theory since late 1980 (Collins and Bilge, 2016). Intersectionality is a theoretical framework for studying and explaining the relationship between the multiple marginalized identities that black women negotiate through their lived experiences (Anzaldúa, 1987; Combahee River Collective, 1983; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Evans-Winters, 2019).

Crenshaw described intersectionality in three domains: structural intersectionality, political intersectionality, and representational intersectionality (Haynes et al. 2020). Crenshaw (1991) described structural intersectionality as a cursory or limited perspective of black women's struggle, structural sexism, and racism through the lens of white women and black

men. Cho et al. (2013) asserted that this limited perspective reveals how "power works in diffuse and differentiated ways through the creation and deployment of overlapping identity categories" (p. 797). Crenshaw (1991) described political intersectionality as conflating gender and racial identity politics and agenda to be the same or a panacea for all black women. Said differently, it is a fallacy that black women share the exact definition of black womanhood. Crenshaw (1991) asserted that representational intersectionality refers to the historically negative images and stereotypes perpetuated about black women: dominating family roles, superhuman, angry, and hypersexualized. Crenshaw's three-dimensional framework for understanding intersectionality theory has been employed to examine the power and identity dynamics specific to the black women college student experiences and social science research overall.

Understanding the compounding effects of oppression based on one's gender, race, and class has been of interest in contemporary research, particularly black women. Identifying as black and a woman are conjoined and cannot be separated, though its complexities and impact often go without consciousness (Collins, 1991; Settles, 2006). To illustrate this sometimes unconscious and delicate dance between having multiple identities, Settles (2006) observed that black women might more strongly identify with their race as most would describe themselves as a black woman as opposed to being a woman who is black, which may also be reflective of a racialized U.S. history (Collins, 1990). Regardless of one's identity description, the complex nature of navigating both gender and racial identities of black women can potentially negatively impact black women's psychological health. Settles (2006) purported that black women who find that they have to decide or prioritize pieces of their identities to navigate

specific life situations are not reflective of their lived experiences, potentially resulting in depression and low self-esteem. As such, the feeling that you represent all those who identify as you weakens the individual identity, which is not typically the case when socializing among those who have the same identities (Collins, 2000; Settles, 2006; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Taylor, 1998). Settles (2006) further stated that others might assume biased and negative perceptions of people who struggle or do not exude confidence in having multiple identities, which contributes to the continued marginalization and isolation of black women (Zamani, 2003), particularly for those who are attending PWI (Harrison-Cook, 1999; Settles, 2006).

This study describes strategies black women community college students utilize in navigating sexist and racist experiences in the classroom, at their institutions, and in their journey toward achieving academic milestones using an intersectionality theoretical framework. Research studies using intersectionality theory to describe the experience of black women help to deepen the equity lens from the black women students' perspective.

Identity Centrality Theory

Tajfel and Turner (1979) described social identity theory as dimensional, consisting of personal identity, which includes one's morals and values, set of life convictions, and closely-held perceptions; and social identity, which includes a group or groups that one assigns their identity membership, for example, gender and racial identities. Identity theory evolved to better understand the distinction and salience of multiple identities one most associates with and how the salience of those identities changes in a situational context and over time (Stryker and Burke 2000) relative to their social and personal identities.

Reitzes and Burke (1980) are notably associated with student identity centrality theory and asserted that college students who most closely associate their identity with the role of being a student are more likely to be socially and academically integrated into college. However, Steele (1997) suggested that college students whose identities have been traditionally stereotyped or marginalized may have less salience student identities as a result of those stereotypes and therefore illustrate academic disengagement as a means to maintain feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. Research using an identity centrality framework for understanding the influence of student identities on academic performance has revealed both positive and negative mediating factors. For example, Settles et al. (2009) found a positive correlation between GPA and racial identity centrality for black students as demonstrated in their friendships with other black students, social networks, and enrollment in black study classes. However, Quinn and Chaudoir (2009) found that students who identify with historically marginalized and stigmatized groups may also experience harmful and debilitating effects.

Gendered racial identity centrality is defined as the degree to which one assigns the essence of their self-concept to their gender and race (Leach et al., 2008). It can serve as a defensive mechanism in the face of gender and racial discrimination and a protective factor from its adverse effects. (Neblett et al., 2012; Sellers et al., 2003; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Black women who have been found to have a high degree of identity centrality may be more likely to have higher degrees of self-esteem because they find strength in the collective of their gender and racial identity (Sellers & Shelton, 2003).

STEREOTYPE THREAT THEORY

Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson are among the first researchers to use stereotype threat theory in an empirical research study to determine the impact of stereotype threat on academic performance of black students. Steel (2018) defined stereotype threat as "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype" (p. 253). In an experiment to control for stereotype threat by convincing students that an experiment was not a measure of their academic ability was developed by black researchers, Steele and Aronson (1995). They found that black students academically performed at the same level as their white counterparts in the same experiment. Also controlling for stereotype threat, Baker et al. (2020) studied affirmative interventions similar to Steele and Aronson (1995) experiment to reduce stereotype threat and found "little evidence of a positive effect of this one-time affirmation of social identity" (p. 722). Also, Nguyen and Ryan (2008) found that mitigating interventions to stereotype threat were more effective for white women than for black women and men.

Steele and Aronson (1995) research also found that effects of stereotype threat varied among their research participants. For example, Steele and Aronson (1995) purported that that for lower academically performing black students, other variables such as substandard academic preparation and misperceptions of academic achievement influenced the results of their experiment. Conversely, they also found that black students who demonstrate a strong academic identity and academically perform well and who are overly reliant on that identity, it may have detrimental emotional and mental health implications understanding that future is consistently at risk because they belong to a minoritized group. In the context of this research,

it is reasonable to assume that Steele and Aronson's (1995) research implies that there is a double jeopardy for black women college students.

Nadler and Komarraju (2016) studied the impact of stereotype threat to the academic performance of 190 black college students, specifically the impact of stereotype threat on academic self-concept, learning climate and perceptions of stereotype threat. Nadler and Komarraju (2016) found that black women possessing a high academic self-concept had performed better academically under stereotype threat than black women students with low academic self-concept. This was reverse for black men. They also found "that the deleterious effect of stereotype threat is not consistent, and that performance may be boosted by providing greater autonomy support and strengthening academic identification (especially for female African American students)" p. 667.

According to Whaley (2018), studies that have used the intersection of race and gender to understand differences in the effects of stereotype threat have found that black women and men had more comparable outcomes than when comparing black women and white women college students. He posited that these studies underpin the notion that racial identity poses a strong stereotype threat than gender identity (Morgan & Mehta 2004; Tine & Gotlieb 2013). In summary, the implications of these research studies on stereotype threat are heterogeneous across social identities and the most salient identity impacted by stereotype threat is that of racial and ethnic identities.

Black feminism, intersectionality, identity centrality, and stereotype theories have been validated and utilized as frameworks for researching the lived experience for black women enrolled in college and together have guided this research study. Therefore, these theories

served as a framework for understanding themes in the described lived experiences of black women college students interviewed for this study.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT AND UTILIZATION

Two data collection instruments were utilized in this research: written essays and interviews.

WRITTEN ESSAYS

The first data collection instrument was the written essay from the research participants. There were three essay questions. The first two questions were designed for the purpose of obtaining a rich description of the participants' background and external factors, one of the five factors that influences college satisfaction and academic engagement outlined in the literature review. These first two questions were designed to contextualize the phenomenon in accordance with Bevan (2014) phenomenological interviewing approach. The third essay question transitioned the subject from describing background information to the primary focus of this research, which is how does their gendered racial identity influence their college experiences and academic engagement, or apprehending the phenomenon according to Bevan (2014) phenomenological interviewing approach. In so doing, the third essay question asks them to describe a class or on-campus experience that they perceived was related to the gendered racial identity. The research participants were asked to type an essay with no minimum or maximum word count. Before writing the essays, they were provided with the purpose of this study, given definitions of the terminology used in the essay questions to control for variances in research participant responses, and were informed that their typed

essays needed to be returned via email within seven days of receiving the essay questions.

Below were the three essay questions:

Background and external factors (contextualizing the phenomenon)

1. Please describe your most memorable moments with your family, friends, and K-12 education experiences that helped form your black women racial and gender identity. How have those experiences influenced or shaped you as a single person, as a wife or significant other, as a mother, among your friends, in your community, at church, or at work (any of these that may apply)?

2. How do you define yourself as a black woman in your everyday life and as a black woman student? Do you feel that there is no difference in your identity as a black woman and as a Black woman student, or would you characterize them differently? Does your everyday home and family responsibilities outside of the college and your academic responsibilities feel overwhelming, at conflict, or difficult to juggle? What benefits and challenges do you feel to being a black woman student and the way you are perceived at home, in the community, church and at work?

Classroom and on campus experiences (apprehending the phenomenon)

3. Please describe an example of a classroom and/or a campus experience that you perceived was related to your identity as a black woman, whether positive or negative. Please describe how that experience influences the way you now engage with your instructors and classmates, and on campus more generally. Please be sure to describe both the classroom or on campus experience as well as how it influenced the way you now engage in the classroom or on campus. Please be as specific and detailed as possible.

INTERVIEWS

The second data collection instrument was through two interviews, the first a 90-minute interview, a method for apprehending the phenomenon also consistent with Bevan (2014) phenomenological interviewing approach. The initial 90-minute interview questions were organized by four of the five factors that influence college experiences and academic engagement outlined in the literature review.

Semi-structured interview questions:

1. Autonomy and self-determination: Reflecting on the college experiences you described in your essay, please describe how those experiences influenced your level of independence or engagement with your faculty, advisors, and classmates if at all. When you are in need of academic supports, are you likely to lean on them for support by asking questions, meeting with them after class, or would you consider your approach to be that of a self-learner and find out things on your own? Why?

   Descriptive Phenomenological follow-up questions:
   - Can you tell me more about the experience? Exactly what happened?
   - What do you do to…
   - How do you know that…
   - What is it like to experience …

2. Academic supports (AS): Now please describe your satisfaction with your college's academic support from faculty, staff, and overall campus experiences. How strongly can you identify with course materials in terms of your personal experiences and explain your rationale? What student social activities have you participated in and do you feel that the events and activities align and support you as a person and as a student?

   Descriptive Phenomenological follow-up questions:

   - Can you tell me more about the experience? Exactly what happened?
   - What do you do to…
   - How do you know that…
   - What is it like to experience …

3. Faculty trust (FT): Describe how you interact with your instructors and other college personnel in terms of your level of appreciation and respect for their feedback on your class discussion, assignments, and grades? Do you rely on the feedback and information, and then what do you do or how do your respond to their feedback? What is your perception of your academic ability based on their feedback? How does the feedback and interactions with your instructors and other college personnel influence your academic performance and success?

Descriptive Phenomenological follow-up questions:

- Can you tell me more about the experience? Exactly what happened?
- What do you do to…
- How do you know that…
- What is it like to experience …

4. Student effort (SE): Now please describe what motivates or challenges the time or the way you complete your class assignments. Do you feel that because of your identity as a black women student you have to worker harder, prove yourself, be more aware of how you are being perceived and why? How do you perceive that your identity as a black woman impacts your academic performance in the classroom or engagement with others on campus?

   Descriptive Phenomenological follow-up questions:

   - Can you tell me more about the experience? Exactly what happened?
   - What do you do to…
   - How do you know that…
   - What is it like to experience …

The second interview was a 30-minute follow-up interview to clarify the meanings derived from the research participants' lived experiences, a method for clarifying the phenomenon also consistent with Bevan (2014) phenomenological interviewing approach.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT SAMPLE METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted at a single institution. The sampling methodology was a nonprobability purposive approach to select ten research participants. All ten research participants wrote an essay in response to the three essay questions as well as participated in the 90-minute virtual interview and 30-minute virtual follow-up interviews. After receiving

Institutional Review Board review and approvals from the site college on February 22, 2022, and my doctoral institution on March 2, 2022, I requested from the site institution contact information of all black women enrolled at the institution from fall 2019 to spring 2022. The research participants needed to be enrolled in more than one semester between Fall 2019 to Spring 2022, but they did not have to be currently enrolled as of the date of the field research. The most recent eight semesters, or approximately two and half years, up to the field research date of this study provided a broad and sufficient range to capture a research population that represented students who recently graduated, students who were enrolled full time or part time, and students who were enrolled and stopped out. Based on these criteria, 344 black women were identified as the target population.

An email was sent on March 14, 2022, which indicated the purpose of this study, outlined the expectation of a written essay about their background and how they developed their gendered racial identity, and explained the purpose of the initial 90-minute and 30-minute recorded virtual follow-up interviews to the 344 black women who met the research participations criteria. The email explained that essays were to be written on their own time, was estimated to take approximately 90 minutes, had to be emailed to me, and that they would receive $50 via their preferred mobile payment services such as Cash App, Zelle, or PayPal to compensate them for their time. The email also indicated that the research participants would receive $65, also via their preferred mobile payment services upon the second follow-up interview to confirm the transcripts from the initial 90-minute interview. Table 3 shows age and enrollment status for the ten research participants.

Table 3. Research Participant Demographics

Research Participant	Age	Enrollment Status
1	22	Graduated
2	26	Enrolled full time
3	26	Stopped out
4	30	Stopped out
5	32	Enrolled part time
6	23	Graduated
7	68	Enrolled part time
8	53	Graduated
9	21	Graduated
10	47	Enrolled part time

DATA ANALYSIS

This research study's data analysis process entailed a thematic analysis of the meanings derived from the research participants' essays and interview transcripts consistent with Sundler et al.'s (2019) *Qualitative Thematic Analysis Based on Descriptive Phenomenology.* This research posited that in a descriptive phenomenological research design, the researcher should adopt an open and reflective approach for understanding the phenomenon as experienced by the research participants. To that end, the following approach to data analysis was used:

1. All data from the essays and interviews were analyzed by deriving meaning, identifying patterns, and then developing themes.
    a. Deriving meanings: This process involved reading and re-reading the essays and interviews and highlighting key words that pertain specifically to the research question vis-à-vis the five categories of factors that influence academic engagement and college experience for black women including background and external factors, autonomy and self-determination, faculty trust, academic supports, and student effort. Particular attention was focused on research participants' reflection on how their classroom and on-campus experiences made them feel and why. Then reflecting on the findings and conclusions

referenced during the literature review, I looked for consistencies and discrepancies, and relationship between meanings were identified.

b. Identifying patterns: This was an iterative process in terms of understanding meanings as described by each of the research participants across all five factors that influence academic engagement college experiences. Arranging meanings into clusters allowed initial narrowing of meanings to only those most closely associated with the research question vis-à-vis the five factors just mentioned. Then this process was repeated but considering all ten research participants' descriptions and assigned meanings.

c. Developing themes: This was also an iterative process in terms of looking for patterns and relationships between meanings derived from the research participants' experiences. The process was further narrowing only those patterns and relationship between meanings to those most closely associated with the research questions vis-à-vis the five category of factors that influence academic engagement and college experience for the participants.

2. The findings as indicated in Chapter Four were then written as substantive expressions and supported with paraphrases from the research participants' narrative essays and transcriptions.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

In a descriptive phenomenology approach to a qualitative research methodology, bracketing is a technique used to allow the researcher to assert personal dispositions, assumptions, and opinions on the research topic to ensure the validity of the data collection analysis relative to the research findings (Gearing, 2004). As Beck (1993) described, external and internal validity is the degree of the accuracy of the researcher's description of their subjects' detailed experience; it is designed to ensure the accurate description and determined meanings assigned in response to the research question.

Guba and Lincoln (1981) described reliability in a qualitative research design as how detailed a researcher has outlined their methodology such that another researcher can follow

and replicate the same approach in a separate research study. The following data collection and analysis methods were employed to ensure the highest degree of validity and reliability.

1. The essays from each of the research participants were read and re-read to achieve contextualization and a holistic knowledge source of the first factor that influence college experiences and academic engagement: the family background and upbringing experiences that helped to form the participants' gendered racial identities.

2. To apprehend the phenomenon and the meanings derived from the research participants' 90-minute interviews related to the remaining four of the five factors that influence college satisfaction and academic engagement, their experiences were transcribed into an Excel workbook detailing the line numbers of the interview transcripts.

3. To demonstrate imaginative variation, the meanings were analyzed by observing consistencies and discrepancies in patterns, or the stable and instable structures, in each of the individual research participant's essays.

4. To clarify the phenomenon and the meanings derived from the research participants' 90-minute interviews, the research participants were asked to confirm the accuracy of the meanings derived during the 30-minute follow-up interviews. Any clarifications provided by the research participants were then updated in the Excel workbook.

5. After all interviews were completed, themes were developed and validated by observing consistencies and discrepancies in the patterns among all ten research participants, which was documented in separate tabs within the Excel workbook.

6. To demonstrate an *epoché* approach of reduction, or to critically examine, challenge, and separate the researcher's knowledge and suppositions of the phenomenon, my reflection process is detailed in the Reflection section of Chapter Five.

LIMITATIONS

The ten research participants in this study all identified as black women who were enrolled at a single institution located in the Midwest region of the United States. The narratives used and subsequent research findings were limited to and based on the gendered racial experiences at a single institution. The participants were purposefully selected from all

black women who attended the site college. As with studying any persons associated with a particularly identity group, black women in general are heterogeneous and represent a broad and diverse breadth of experiences relative to their identity. Therefore, prudence is recommended before generalizing to other geographic locations and other racialized women demographics.

SUMMARY

This chapter provided an overview of the qualitative descriptive phenomenological research design in the context of the study's research question: How does the lived experience of black women attending community colleges influence their academic engagement and college experiences? A brief discussion of the descriptive phenomenological research design included of the core tenants of methods of data collection including written essays and two virtual interviews that incorporated methods to ensure accuracy of the meanings, patterns, and themes derived from the narrative descriptions obtained the during the data collection process. Those methods included contextualizing the research participants' experiences relative to the research question, apprehending how the research participants experience the phenomenon, and clarifying the meanings derived from the research participants' narratives. Part of the discussion was an *epoché* approach for reduction, or bracketing the researcher's knowledge and suppositions related to the phenomenon also to ensure the accuracy of only the meanings as expressed by the research participants experience with the phenomenon. Finally, this chapter provided an overview of the sample methodology, the data analysis, the validity and reliability, and the limitations of the research methodology.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

The research question for this study was adopted for the specific purpose of exploring the lived experiences of black women, their perspectives about their gendered racial identity, and their perceptions on how their identity influences their college satisfaction and academic engagement. This chapter includes the results and analysis of ten research participants' responses to essay questions related to background and external factors that most influenced their gendered racial identities and classroom and on-campus experiences. Also included in this chapter are the results and analysis of 90-minute initial interviews and the 30-minute follow-up interviews with the ten participants related to the remaining four factors that influence college satisfaction and academic engagement: (1) autonomy and self-determination, (2) academic support services, (3) faculty trust, and (4) student effort.

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Below is a summary of each of the ten participants' profiles based on their responses to Essay Questions 1 and 2, which were related to their backgrounds and external factors that most influenced their gendered racial identities.

PARTICIPANT 1

Participant 1 is 22 years old and identifies as a biracial black woman. She reflected on her parents being convinced by her coaches that she would be great at sports. Now she realized

that the coaches' interest in her was because of her racial identity and physical attributes. She also recalled some of her teammates' expectations that she should be good at sports and, at one point, commented, "You are supposed to be good…. you're black!… It's in your blood!" She also recalled being bullied by boys on social media because of her race with messages such as "pick cotton" or "blackie."

When she became involved in student clubs and sports in high school, she recalled rumors that she made the varsity team because they needed diversity. Her parents divorced, which is when she became more curious about her racial and ethnic heritage. She described at times feeling "whitewashed" based on her high school, community, and family experiences and growing up in a predominately white environment. She commented, "I felt that I was 'too black' around my white friends and 'too white' around my black friends." Consequently, these events led to feelings of insecurity and anxiety and eventually affected her academic success throughout high school.

However, Participant 1 graduated from her community college within two years with a 3.9 GPA. She attended her community college on an athletics scholarship and became a student worker. Upon graduating, she enrolled at a four-year institution.

PARTICIPANT 2

Participant 2 is 26 years old and identifies as a gender-fluid black woman who is single and lives alone. She reflected on when she was preschool age and tried out for the gymnastics team, and her hairstyle created a challenge during a particular gymnastics routine. She explained that this was when she realized she was different, because no one else had hair like

hers. Although she felt no shame, she recalled feeling like a spectacle. She further explained that when she was school-aged and showed interest in a young boy who was mutually interested, he then assaulted her. At that point, she realized that too many young girls become casualties of boys who lack respect for others' bodies. She realized the world would see her gender identity before seeing her as a person.

As a teenager, she recalled an incident in an African American History class where the teacher referred to his classroom full of black students as "you people" and followed it up with "are ungrateful." The teacher looked at her and said, "You get it, right?" She indicated that the teacher mistook her good class performance for kinship and attempted to take advantage of her reserved nonconfrontational nature.

She feels financially secure now but understands that could change instantly. She fears financial instability will affect how much time she spends on her education. As she now attends her community college full-time, her personal and academic responsibilities are hard to juggle. She anticipates transferring to a four-year institution soon.

PARTICIPANT 3

Participant 3 is 26 years old and identifies as a gender-fluid lesbian. She grew up in a mostly white, stable, middle-class community with college-educated parents. Her parents sought out pockets of connectivity within black communities, including church membership and youth-oriented organizations, as well as seeking services from black-owned businesses. While grateful for her parents' efforts to immerse her in the black community, her identity as a black

woman was sometimes at odds with other aspects of her identity, particularly regarding her gender identity. Fortunately, her parents came to accept and love her.

As a teenager, she was aware of her race and gender because she participated in golf, a sport predominately played by elite white men. She explained that witnessing the threat of violence against black people as a teenager influenced how she navigated predominately white spaces. Finally, her experience with sexism is related to her chronic health condition, stating that "black women are taken less seriously than men, leading to dismissal, misdiagnosis, and exceedingly late diagnosis."

Participant 3 is not currently enrolled in college due to her health condition. However, she was previously enrolled part-time and has stopped out on and off over the most recent three years.

PARTICIPANT 4

Participant 4 is 30 years old and prefers to identify as an African American woman, not black because black is a color, and her skin is brown. She recalled moments associated with her participation in beauty pageants and feeling like a princess. However, as an adult, she realized that those pageants taught her self-love and confidence. She stated, "This taught me that the world may judge you by what you wear and how you look, but the only opinion of you that matters is your own."

Participant 4 is a single working mother and indicated that her home life and responsibilities are overwhelming. She is not currently enrolled in her local community college

but has already obtained several certifications, and she plans to complete an associate's degree at her community college.

PARTICIPANT 5

Participant 5 is 32 years old and recalled memories of competitive jealousies when she and her siblings were compared to other family members based on their skin tones. She described these comparisons as a "silent killer of black unity." She explained that these experiences made her self-conscious and caused low self-esteem. She also described comparisons of physical features (e.g., hair), physical appearance (e.g., clothing), and personality types (e.g., humble or introverted vs. outgoing and extroverted) that subconsciously determine feelings of worthiness.

She also described a situation with a friend whose mother banned them from playing together, which also caused her to have low self-esteem and feel self-conscious about her dark skin. Subconsciously, she started to adopt the mentality that, as a black woman, you must compete with other black women to feel worthy. In school, she gained cool points for being a "pretty dark skin girl with long hair" but lost points for being "too" sensitive.

Participant 5 earned an associate's degree at another institution before enrolling at her community college and plans to enroll at a four-year institution. She is a single mother.

PARTICIPANT 6

Participant 6 is 23 years old and recalled having two strong black parents who were great role models and very stereotypical in establishing gender-based roles for their children. She explained that her mom was very feminine and guided her and her female siblings to keep

up their appearances and how they presented themselves, and her dad would get upset if they were doing “masculine” chores around the house. Regarding her racial identity, her mom honed the notion that black is beautiful despite living in a world where black is not the beauty standard.

Participant 6 attended her community college full-time, became a student worker, and completed an associate’s degree. Upon graduating, she enrolled at a four-year university and planned to enroll in graduate school.

Participant 7

Participant 7 is 68 years old and described being bullied by other classmates because she was skinny and shy, and she believed at that time to be unattractive. However, it was life-changing when an older male teacher stepped in to stop the bullying and helped her see her real self-worth as a young black girl. She began to heal from her bullying experiences by participating in an inner city at-risk, low-income children’s program designed to engage youth in educational activities on college campuses, where she was indoctrinated with the idea that she belonged in a place of higher education.

Participant 7 earned undergraduate and graduate degrees. She has years of successful work experience, owns her own business, and has been periodically taking classes at her community college for leisure.

Participant 8

Participant 8 is 53 years old and recalled family trips to the south and her inability to go in the front door of a restaurant. She explained that no matter how light her skin was, she knew

that black people were not treated equally. However, she grew up with magazines like *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Essence*, where being black was celebrated through fashion, music, athletics, and intellectual accomplishments. She also had access to books from black intellects and authors like Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, and James Baldwin. She recalled her grandmother emphasizing that a "colored" woman needed an education and not to depend on a man to take care of her. She recalled experiences with darker-skinned friends and being aware of the differences in how you were treated based on skin tone within her race. This experience taught her to uplift all black women because society already had so much stacked against them. Finally, she recalled a time before enrolling in high school when her mother wanted her to attend a predominantly White girls' school for a better education. However, she emphatically refused because she did not want to lose her black identity and feared losing herself forever.

Participant 8 earned a bachelor's degree right after high school and then recently earned an associate's degree from her community college, graduating with a 4.0 GPA. She is recently separated and a working mother of mostly adult children.

PARTICIPANT 9

Participant 9 is 21 years old and reflected on her parents' mission to mold her into the "perfect black girl" and push academic achievement. However, she described the concept of perfection as "what justifies the injustice and is the collateral damage to black women's identity." At age 11, when she saw the death of Trayvon Martin, she realized the severity and repercussions of being black in America.

While enrolled full-time at her community college, Participant 9 was a student worker and served in several student leadership positions. After earning an associate's degree, she recently earned a bachelor's degree and plans to graduate school.

PARTICIPANT 10

Participant 10 is 47 years old and reflected on her parents, who were born and raised in the south and had to struggle for everything from education to equal opportunity. From an early age, she felt a sense of duty to obey her parents and older siblings, excel at school, represent the family well, and perform above social expectations. Her view of beauty was shaped by the few black women she saw on television, but her view of power was shaped by her mother, who started each day with prayer. In school, she excelled and had opportunities to join academic competitions for which she was often the only black person. Her dad encouraged academic excellence as a way of independence and to excel over those who stand between her and her career goals.

While in high school, she desired to attend a historically black college and university (HBCU); however, a teacher told her she was foolish and wasting her intelligence by attending an HBCU. Her teacher's angst related to her attending an HBCU was the beginning of learning what it meant to compete as a black woman in academia.

Participant 10 had previously earned her doctorate and later enrolled at her community college to earn a certificate related to her profession.

Participant Profiles: Summary

The ten participants' backgrounds ranged from traditional to adult-aged students. All ten either started or completed a credential at a community college and were enrolled or graduated with a bachelor's degree or advanced degree; in some cases, they returned to their community college for leisure or additional credentialing. Their racial identities were biracial black, black, or a preference to be identified as African American. Their gender identities were identified as woman, gender fluid, and nonbinary. The experiences that helped form their gendered racial identity ranged from primary schooling, family dynamics and influences, and involvement in community events and activities. These experiences positively influenced the development of their identities or guided them to create their own identities beyond what they learned from their experiences. Although several environmental barriers were identified, most participants attained a college credential, whether a certificate, associate degree, or bachelor's degree, and in two cases, an advanced postsecondary degree.

ESSAY RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Classroom or On-campus Experiences

This section presents the results and analysis of the ten participants' responses to essay question three related to their classroom and on-campus experiences. Based on their responses, 17 individual classroom or on-campus situations were identified and clustered into three themes: (1) the use of stereotypes, (2) the presence or lack of diversity, and (3) the feeling of being dismissed. Table 4 provides the classroom or on-campus three themes and the definitions derived from the participants' narratives.

Table 4. Classroom or On-Campus Three Themes and Definitions Derived from Participants' Narratives

Classroom or on-campus three themes	Definitions derived from participants' narratives
The use of stereotypes (10)	The use of gendered racial generalizations and micro-aggressions, whether intentional or unintentional that are offensive and used to marginalize or oppress
The presence or lack of diversity (5)	A measure of heterogeneity in the representation of gendered racial experiences and qualities
The feeling of being dismissed (2)	The lessening of worth in opinion, experience, participation, or engagement based on gendered racial biases.

Table 5 is a distribution of the 17 classroom or on-campus themes by the participant.

Table 5. Distribution of the Classroom or On-Campus Themes by Participant

Participant	Number of classroom or on-campus experiences described	Classroom or on-campus themes		
		The use of stereotype	The presence or lack of diversity	The feeling of being dismissed
1	1		1	
2	1			1
3	4	4		
4	1	1		
5	2	1		1
6	1		1	
7	1		1	
8	1	1		
9	3	2	1	
10	2	1	1	
TOTAL	17	10	5	2

Theme 1: The Use of Stereotype

Six participants described ten classroom and on-campus experiences clustered as stereotypes. The stereotype experiences were further analyzed, and two categories emerged.

Table 6 illustrates categories of stereotype experiences, participants' feelings and reflections, participants' responses, and participants' process for deciding responses.

Table 6. Categories of the Use of Stereotypes, Participants' Feelings and Reflections, Responses, and Process for Deciding Responses

CATEGORIES OF THE USE OF STEREOTYPES	PARTICIPANTS' FEELINGS AND REFLECTIONS	PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES	PARTICIPANTS' PROCESS FOR DECIDING RESPONSES
Inappropriate gendered racial curiosity	Disappointed; conflicted and saddened; traumatized; degraded; diminished and thwarted	To override or cancel the experience or disengage	Applying context to stereotype experiences which refer to assessing the intent of the person using stereotypes and then assessing the risks and benefits of their response to the experience
Micro-aggressions that are threatening or oppressive		To defend and speak up for themselves or their position To de-escalate the experience to achieve an intended outcome	Subverting low expectations, which refers to rising above the stereotypes

The two categories of the use of stereotypes, inappropriate gendered racial curiosity and threatening or oppressive micro-aggressions, were not consistently experienced as mutually exclusive events. This means that some participants experienced stereotypes described as inappropriate gendered racial curiosity and threatening or oppressive microaggressions. Some participants' experiences were microaggressions based on others' biases or internalized oppression projected from other black people.

Participant 3 described an experience while attending a four-year university:

> When the freshman students arrived in the fall, we were assigned lodging. While respectful, there were questions about my hair routine. Also, there was a sense of needing to go out of their way to commune with students of color.

Participant 3's classmates' questions about her hair routine and going out of their way to commune with students of color were interpreted as marginalization by implying there is something abnormal about black women's hair routine and that socializing with students of color requires some level of effort that is different than when socializing with other students. In Participant 3's case, she expressed disappointment and decided not to respond. Her process for deciding a response was to understand the context of the experience in that not all students have been exposed to diversity, and the benefits of responding did not rise to a sufficient level beyond the benefit of overriding it.

Participant 4 described an experience while attending her community college:

> When starting IVs, I am looked at more by the teacher than anyone else. I believe they want to check my face to ensure I am not offended. They want to know if I give a signal or roll my eyes as a sign that I've had enough.

Participant 4's experience of the instructor observing her more often than other students is an example of a microaggression based on biases. In this experience, there was no inappropriate gendered racial curiosity, but the instructor's microaggression of observing Participant 4 more than other students were perceived to be based on personal biases. In this case, Participant 4 expressed feeling conflicted because of the uncertainty of why she was being observed more than other students. Her response was to cancel the experience and instead subvert the low expectations imposed by being overly observed.

Participant 5 described an experience while attending her community college:

> The student club advisor offered me a position as the president. I was honored and accepted. But during my time with the club, I felt pushed around and used. The advisor would talk over me or disregard my requests. So, I eventually resigned. My family experience was projected here when I subscribed to the matriarch system of "black unity" ideology within the student club.

Participant 5 described her experience with her advisor and how that experience reminded her of her family's subscribing to matriarchy and the idea of black women ruling the family. In this experience, there was no inappropriate gendered racial curiosity but rather a microaggression based on internalized oppression projected from the advisor, a black woman. However, there were two stereotypes at play. The first stereotype was the perception of matriarchy from the advisor that strong black women rule their families. Participant 5's narrative about her process for deciding a response was avoiding the stereotype of the angry black woman. Specifically, she stated:

> I was trying to juggle all these different ideas about what a black woman should be. One thing that I take to heart is that I'm a nurturer, but as far as the angry black woman image, I rebelled against that because that diminishes our light as women. I know being firm is important, but I'm trying to find that balance between being firm versus being just furious and angry.

Stereotyped classroom and on-campus experiences helped motivate research participants to create their own identities to subvert low expectations. Participant 5 referenced many times throughout the interviews becoming her authentic self, whom she described as an artist, a single mother, and a student. She described resisting external pressures to live up to stereotypical expectations of what it means to be a black woman and an engaged student as well as avoiding the pitfalls of low expectations as they are damaging to her health and, ultimately, her happiness. In Participant 5's case, her response was to disengage by resigning as student club president.

Participant 8 described an experience while attending her community college:

> My friend (a black male) told me that he found a phone sitting on a table and decided to turn it in to a nearby office. Then two campus police officers approached and asked to speak with him alone. He obliged, but I felt they racially profiled him. I waited for a few minutes, then approached while he was talking to the officers. I saw him being uncomfortable, so I introduced myself and emphasized that I was a student. At that point, I saw the tension de-escalate on the part of the officers. I then interjected and asked, "Did you officers find the phone owner because the phone was turned into the nearby office?"

Participant 8's response to defend her male friend was to de-escalate the experience of the campus police questioning her friend. When describing the process for deciding how to respond, she explained that knowing her presence as a woman, which she referred to as the power of womanhood, would help her friend and de-escalate the experience. Although feeling saddened and disappointed by the situation, particularly as it occurred in an educational environment, she optimistically expressed that she felt encouraged to understand that law enforcement needed people with her lived experience.

Participant 9 described an experience while attending her four-year university:

> There was an event for graduating students. Excited, I walked towards a table passing out honor cords, and two administrative members looked up at me and then continued engaging in conversation. Being patient, I waited. After a while, they looked back at me, and I began to say something when one of them cut me off. In a condescending tone, he asked for my student ID and said, "we can't just be giving anything to anybody, y' know? You might be a student. You might not."

Participant 9's feelings about her experience were a disappointment and being thwarted. After taking time to understand the context of what happened, that is, to acknowledge it as a microaggression intended to oppress based on her identity, she persisted in subverting low expectations and rose above the experience. She went on and explained that:

> I shrugged it off and proceeded to hand him my identification card. While I was waiting, a young white male walked up to the table and was immediately greeted with a smile and given his honor cord. It was followed by a "Welcome to BLANK University!" After 30 minutes, he handed me my honor cord without another word. The administrative members did not ignore the white male student. They did not ask him for his ID. He was welcome here. I wasn't.

Participant 10 described an experience while attending her community college:

> The advising staff questioned my ability to speak other languages. There was a level of surprise when she learned that I have a facility for learning languages and that I'm moderately fluent in Spanish. She began to question my background and why I wanted to learn Spanish. She became more flustered when I indicated that I would be taking three classes while working full time. I assured her I had a plan and was ready to move forward, but she probed further and asked whether I had children.

In Participant 10's experience, her advisor's questions about speaking other languages, managing three courses, maintaining a full-time job, and having children were described as inappropriate gendered racial curiosity and the use of microaggressions intended to marginalize and oppress. The questions were considered offensive and degrading. Because the advisor had preconceived ideas about Participant 10's identity, those ideas were intended to impose lower standards on the participant's capabilities. Participant 10 indicated that:

> I had to say, this is what I'm going to do. These are the courses I need. These are the credits already taken that will transfer, and I'm going to be done by the end of the school year. It was offensive because I knew I could have acted in two different ways if I had been in a different frame of mind. I could have gotten loud and disagreeable and exposed what I thought she was trying to say, or I could have just said I'm not doing this and taken the classes someplace else.

Participant 10's response was complex in that she defended her position, which was to enroll in the three classes. She responded by overriding the offensive experience and de-escalating the situation, all coping methods to subvert the low expectations projected by the

advisor. The de-escalation response was deliberate to avoid the stereotype of the angry black woman.

In summary, many of these experiences were described as taxing and causing fatigue, leading to measured academic disengagement. However, some experiences were described as motivation to focus on the goals and purpose for attending college and fulfilling their authentic selves. These aspirations were put above classroom and campus social integration. However, awareness of these stereotypes helped to navigate falling into stereotypes projected by non-black people or perpetuated through internalized oppression by other black people. Even further, motivation to focus on their goals may have resulted in limiting social integration and avoiding unnecessary classroom and campus engagement perceived to have minimal influence on obtaining a college credential. An example of unnecessary classroom and campus experiences is dealing with daily microaggressions and deciding how, when, and the risks and benefits of addressing them. Participants three and ten described, respectively:

> Participant 3: It is a mixture of being on your toes, ready to encounter all those things, and where you feel like you have to prove yourself. But you're also listening and saying, I don't care what you think.

> Participant 10: I feel like there's this invisible stereotype that I'm always fighting. They would rather you be mean, so then they can have a complaint, but if I'm professional, they're like, hey, did she just hold me accountable? I have learned to be deliberate because it's costly to act otherwise.

Theme 2: The Presence or Lack of Diversity

Five participants described one classroom or on-campus experience each as the presence or lack of diversity. Table 7 illustrates the cluster type of diverse experiences, the

outcomes related to diversity experiences, and methods for overcoming or coping with the lack of diversity experiences.

Table 7. Theme 2: The Presence or Lack of Diversity, Outcomes, and Methods for Overcoming or Coping with the Lack of Diversity

Theme 2 – The presence or lack of diversity	Outcomes	Methods for overcoming or coping with the lack of diversity
Diversity present, observed, and considered a positive experience	Good grades; critical thinking skills; adept at debating issue positions respectfully; personal and intellectual growth; higher academic engagement; higher faculty-student interaction, and more campus social integration; broaden knowledge base of opportunities; increased optimism; growth in confidence; sense of ownership	N/A
Diversity not present, observed, and considered a negative experience	Feeling of insecurities; fear of failure; isolation; sense of emptiness and void of purpose; academic disengagement	Reflection; understanding context; awareness of accomplishments; a sense of worth

Three participants' narrative descriptions reflected experiences where diversity was present, observed, and considered a positive experience.

Participant 1 described their experiences while attending her community college.

> I finally saw diversity. I saw classmates and professors that looked like me. I saw students and professors with different racial and ethnic backgrounds. I saw students of all ages: mothers, fathers, elders, etc. For once, I felt comfortable in my skin, my background, and my identity. I did not have to pretend that I was someone I was not.

Participant 1 described her experience as transformative compared to her secondary education experiences. While attending her community college, she was a student-athlete and a student worker and regularly accessed resources such as the tutoring center and all forms of

academic engagement. She earned her associate's degree within two years and achieved a 3.9 graduating GPA. Specifically, Participant 1 indicated that:

> I had the best grades ever in my entire life. I was so focused. It was a great experience, and I instantly started to bond. It made me feel a sense of belonging, and I felt worthy and was no longer insecure about myself.

She described high school experiences as less racially, socially, and economically diverse, where she struggled academically, suffered from anxiety, and lacked motivation.

Participant 6 also described an experience while attending her community college.

> I am enrolled in a class that has four people. The professor and the students are culturally diverse and aware. Because of this, we can talk about topics on gender and racial identity. We talk about what is whiteness and privilege. We get into deep conversations about different identities and injustices.

Participant 6 indicated that her experience where the professor and her classmates were culturally diverse contributed to her academic engagement. Specifically, she explained that:

> I was very open to conversations because I wouldn't be judged. I knew that they would understand and respect my opinion. This is the first time in my college career that I felt understood. I enjoyed class so much that I wrote a paper to the professor thanking her for creating an atmosphere that was free and understanding.

Participants noted that representation or seeing other students, faculty, and staff of the same race influenced their classroom and on-campus engagement. Participant 10 reflected on her experience while attending an HBCU:

> Attending an HBCU changed everything because I had not been around that many black people. It was a culture shock and amazing to see black people socially involved. There are the black intellectuals and the black theater people. Seeing black expression in all of these traditionally white spaces was nurturing.

Participant 10 indicated that attending an HBCU exposed her to black excellence and the breadth and depth of black intellectual experiences. She explained that:

> I saw this personal relationship in the classroom. The faculty were about you walking away from their class able to intelligently articulate concepts; you're going to be able to write fluently and think broadly. It's almost like you represented the college when you leave with that sense of ownership.

Conversely, two participants reflected on experiences where diversity was not present, observed, and considered a negative experience.

Participant 7 described the lack of diversity while attending her four-year undergraduate and graduate institutions:

> I was the only black female student in a class of 80 people for my undergraduate degree at a school of physical therapy and the only black student while pursuing my master's in physical therapy. Half of my years as an undergraduate and graduate student were filled with insecurities, anxiety, fear of failure, and isolation.

Participant 7 spoke about the experience of attending her four-year and graduate institutions and being in an academic program that lacked gender diversity in career pathways typically dominated by white men, but how, over time and reflection, she now engages at her community college:

> I believe the bulk of all the emotions were derived from my need to constantly prove myself when relating to other students and staff. Those emotions are long gone now that I am retired with many achievements and successes over the years. It took my successful journey to lose that baggage.

Participant 9 reflected on the lack of diversity at her four-year institution compared to her prior experience at her community college:

> The diverse experiences at my community college were not available at my four-year institution. At my community college, I was involved in clubs and organizations where I could learn everyone’s name and implement the change they wanted to see. I was involved at my four-year institution but did not know my constituents well.

Participant 9 also shared reflections on her level of satisfaction with campus engagement opportunities at her four-year institution.

> I seemed to be serving an empty body at my four-year institution. I couldn't see the change implemented on campus, whereas at my community college, change was immediate. I wanted to attend my four-year institution not only to advance academically but to enhance myself as a person. While attending my four-year institution, I learned that we must look beyond the classroom and on-campus experiences. I learned that even within safe spaces, there are hindrances.

Participants 7 and 9 used reflections to learn and draw meaning from their experiences with the lack of diversity on their college or university campuses. Participant 7 acknowledged that the source of her insecurities, anxiety, fear of failure, and isolation was partly due to her feeling that she needed to prove herself. However, through reflection on her achievements and success, she overcame these experiences and the need to prove herself. While Participant 9 acknowledged the disappointment in her university experiences, she looked to future opportunities to grow personally and professionally. Both participants' methods for overcoming and coping with the lack of diversity were done over time, with reflection, and through a growth mindset.

In summary, for those participants who had experiences in their backgrounds where their environments were less racially and socioeconomically diverse, experiencing diversity on a college campus was a positive experience. When participants noted positive experiences, they also described positive academic outcomes such as improved grades, critical thinking skills, being adept at debating issues respectfully, and personal and intellectual growth. Academic engagement, faculty-student interaction, and campus social integration were noted benefits of those participants who observed diversity in the classroom or on their college campuses.

Further, where racial representation was most fully experienced was reflected in Participant 10's previous enrollment at an HBCU where she described the experience as broadening her knowledge base of opportunities, increased her optimism, and helped to build her confidence and a sense of ownership of her future.

However, for those participants who experienced the lack of diversity, the results were feelings of insecurity, fear of failure, isolation, and a sense of emptiness and void of purpose. Noteworthy, though, for the two participants who experienced the lack of diversity, both had achieved academic success. Participant 7 earned a graduate degree, years of experience in the workforce, and had owned her own business. Participant 9 earned associate's and bachelor's degrees and intended to enroll in graduate school. In both of these participants' experiences, reflection on those experiences, understanding context, and awareness of individual accomplishments and self-worth were components of overcoming and coping with negative experiences from the lack of diversity. Although there is a 47-year age gap between the youngest and oldest of these five participants, all used reflection and a growth mindset to put their experiences into a forward perspective.

Theme 3: The Feeling of Being Dismissed

Two participants described classroom or on-campus experiences as dismissive, and both are noted below.

Participant 2 described an administrator's response to her after reporting an incident with a male student:

> In great detail, she described this student's family life, how many siblings they had, and the genders of the siblings, and from her mouth, she told me the student "was raised to

> be very respectful toward women." She tried to assure me that the behavior I experienced and witnessed was misinterpreted.

Participant 2 perceived two outcomes from her experience. First, the administrator dismissed her experience by trying to convince her that what she had experienced was not what she thought. Participant 2 explained that:

> All the administrator had to tell me was that she'd spoken to him and told him what behavior was ok and what wasn't. Instead, she chose to invalidate my experience. No one wants to admit that even a student with good grades, friends, and a positive demeanor can be deceitful. Why should I be hypervigilant when everyone else gets to be in class safely and comfortably?

Second, Participant 2 perceived that the administrator questioned her desirability based on the participant's intersecting identities as a gender-fluid black woman and what she garnered from her interview with the student who took the photo without consent. This experience resulted in Participant 2 feeling unsafe in the class, around that student, and at an institution where biases may be prevalent, leaving her wanting to disengage academically altogether.

Participant 9 described while attending her four-year university:

> I ran for student trustee and made it to final interviews with four members of the university's board of trustees. When describing my community college accomplishments, one of the board members snidely commented, "your junior college?"

Although on the surface, the board member's comments did not appear to reflect gendered racial biases, they were perhaps comments disguising gendered racial biases by diminishing her accomplishments because she attended a community college. Participant 9 explained:

> It was astonishing to see an advocate for higher education diminish someone else's academic achievements. A community college, especially for black women, provides an opportunity to obtain a four-year education and other professional work experiences and caters to the needs of marginalized students.

In summary, the dismissive experiences of Participants 2 and 9 were perceived as either excused or disguised. For Participant 2, the college administrator excused the offensive experience of the student taking her photo without her consent by focusing on whether she was considered desirable and then justified the offending student's behaviors and actions by describing his family background. For Participant 9, the board member disguised their biases by "snidely" dismissing her community college accomplishments. In these scenarios, Participants 2 and 9 expressed their experiences as institutionalized practices designed to marginalize, discourage, and thwart educational opportunities by using microaggression based on gendered racial identities.

INTERVIEW RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Three key themes emerged from interviews related to four of the five factors influencing black women's college satisfaction and academic engagement: (1) autonomy and self-determination, (2) faculty trust, (3) academic support services, and (4) student effort. Table 8 reflects the number of references from eight of the ten participants' interviews relevant to the three key themes and the four factors. Participants 7 and 8 narratives were outliers and therefore were not clustered as part of the three key themes. This is perhaps due to their respective ages, 68 and 53, and having earned a bachelor's degree more than ten years prior to enrolling at their community college; Participant 7 earned a master's degree and has years of work experience.

The three themes concerning ASD, AS, FT, and SE were not consistently present across the four categories of factors. This was evidenced by letting go of baggage and creating self-identity in two of the four factors, and developing self-agency was present in three of the four categories. The three key themes are defined as:

Table 8. Number of References from the Ten Participants' Interviews Relevant to the Three Themes and the Four Factors that Influence Black Women and Academic Engagement

	Three Themes		
Four factors that influence black women and academic engagement	Letting go of baggage and creating self-identity	Developing Self -agency	Navigating learning experiences
1. Autonomy and self-determination (ASD)	5	11	15
2. Academic support services (AS)	-	13	5
3. Faculty trust (FT)	-	-	25
4. Student effort (SE)	9	22	7
TOTALS	14	46	52

1. **Letting go of baggage and creating self-identity:** This refers to releasing past gendered racial identity experiences that prevent and hinder the development of an individual black woman's identity.

2. **Developing self-agency:** This refers to tapping into those innate and gendered racial experiences to develop self-sustaining action through:

    a. **Building connections:** This refers to cultivating a network of academic, personal, and other support systems, as well as what it is like to sense a feeling of belongingness.

    b. **Focusing on goals** means understanding purpose and achieving authenticity while navigating learning experiences.

3. **Navigating learning experiences:** This refers to being agile while understanding the role of self-awareness, personal experiences, and interpretation of those experiences in deciding how to traverse academic engagement.

a. **Understanding context:** This refers to accepting social conditions and experiences outside of a student's control, whether they are stereotypes and biases or the lack of ability to empathize due to the limitation of lived experiences from other students, faculty, and staff. Acceptance does not convey agreement but only accepting that you have no control over the other person's perceptions.

Theme 1: Letting Go of Baggage and Creating Self-Identity

Letting go of baggage and creating self-identity refers to releasing past gendered racial identity experiences that prevent and hinder the development of an individual black woman's identity. Four participants made 14 references to letting go of baggage and creating self-identity across two categories: autonomy and self-determination (ASD) and student effort (SE). The following are excerpts from the four participants' interviews that referenced this theme.

Participant 1 reflected on how she deals with being the only one or one of the few black women in her college classes and when she is called on to offer her perspective:

> It makes me feel pressured and overwhelmed. I was careful about what I said and didn't want to say the wrong thing. I didn't like it when that happened in high school. It would affect me the whole day, and I would keep thinking about that class discussion. If that happened today, I could let that go because I'm a person at the end of the day. I don't feel like I should represent everyone and their opinion.

Participant 1 was asked to explain what made the biggest difference between her earning less than a 3.0 GPA in high school and her 3.9 GPA at her community college. She explained that:

> I was never comfortable with my racial identity in the field or classroom. However, going to my community college, I developed that comfort, which contributed to my academic success. I wasn't scared to make a mistake in class or if I said the wrong answer. I tried harder and didn't doubt myself anymore.

Participant 1's reference to letting go of her past high school experiences related to her racial identity insecurities was associated with letting go of baggage. Her reference to being a person at the end of the day and that she doesn't feel that like she represents everyone, and their opinion was associated with creating self-identity. When asked why she had improved academic performance in terms of her GPA in college compared to her high school GPA, she attributed that to developing comfort in her identity. The relationship between Participant 1's references above and her not being scared to make mistakes in class or say the wrong answer and trying harder was associated with autonomy and self-determination (ASD), and student effort (SE).

Participant 2 also reflected on what it is like being the only one, or one of few, black women in a classroom in two different situations.

Situation one:

> It is a burden to feel like I have to be the voice when sometimes I just want to be a regular student like everyone else. I don't want to have to be a teacher as well, but it feels like I don't have a choice when I'm being taught by people who cannot or who don't have the perspective that I have. So, even though they may be very well learned, they may have many degrees, but because they don't have my lived experiences, they're going to have blind spots.

Situation two:

> I can understand non-black women's experiences, but I can't expect them to understand me. I was wearing a band t-shirt one day, and my instructor asked if I knew that band. I don't think she meant it negatively, but she said, "Oh, you're full of surprises. She made an assumption based on my racial identity. Those assumptions can get in the way of your education because people don't see you as a person first.

Participant 2's reference to being the voice for other black students, playing a dual role as student and teacher, and not having instructors with her lived experiences were associated

baggage that comes with being the only one or one of few black students in her class. In situation two, the faculty's surprise that Participant 2 was wearing a band t-shirt connected with vintage rock music that would presumably appeal to white people who were generations ahead of hers, was also associated with the baggage that comes with biases. The relationship between these references and her awareness of those biases, yet her decision to wear the band t-shirt and her reference to being a person first was associated with Participant 2 creating her own black woman identity. Together, situations one and two were representative of Participant 2's establishing autonomy and self-determination (ASD).

Participant 2 reflected on the relationship between her identity concerning academic success:

> Studying harder could help my grades, but it wouldn't necessarily equate to success in class. I understand that the grading system measures the quality of work, but I got very good grades in a class from which I got nothing. Successful black women are expected to work harder than everyone else. But I don't think that makes me who I am. It's something that I'm doing in response to my surroundings. I am doing it for survival. I don't want to be extra resilient. I just want to be myself and the world to work for me as it does for others.

Participant 2's reference to black women working harder than everyone was associated with the underlying biases of her faculty's perception and, therefore, the theme of letting go of baggage. Her reference to just wanting to be herself was associated with creating her own identity.

Participant 5 reflected on the underrepresentation of black artists in her class curriculum:

> I noticed that most known artists are white, but do I kick up dust about this. I'm content knowing I can be one of those black artists others look up to. I can get inspiration from artists in general, other cultures, other people, and other genders. So, I'm not going to

> limit myself to just black artists anyway. So, that's why it's not worth my peace. You only have a certain amount of energy in a day.

Further, Participant 5 spoke about her black woman identity through self-reflection and self-awareness:

> You don't know where you're going when you're not self-aware. The social norms and trends are just leading you. So, when you're self-aware, you can step back and ask yourself questions about the decisions that you're making and take accountability for them instead of letting life happen. When I'm self-aware, I don't have to worry about making those bad decisions and feeling the bitterness and all the hate and anger I used to feel. I always seek true peace.

The relationship between Participant 5's references to most known artists being white, not being self-aware, being led by social norms, the feelings of bitterness, hate, and anger associated with negative gendered racial experiences, and those things not being worth her peace was associated with letting go of baggage. Instead, Participant 5's reference to finding inspiration from artists in general, other cultures, other people, and other genders was associated with creating her own black woman identity. Her letting go of the past and having self-awareness for creating her own identity were associated with ASD.

Like Participant 2, Participant 9 reflected on the relationship between her identity concerning academic success based on four classroom and on-campus experiences.

Situation one:

> I must complete my work at least ten times better than my counterparts or even other black women. There is so much pressure when adopting the standards they want us to fit into. So, there's an oral presentation that I have to complete with my group. Some professors are biased and say, so (Participant 9's name), where's your portion of the work? So, you're holding me to a higher standard than my other classmates, but why? And it wouldn't be because I'm a graduate student, or it wouldn't be because I'm a senior in my class?

Situation two:

> We must meet invisible regulations and checkboxes within everybody's head. And it's not abiding by what is in an academic rubric, and it's based on perceptions. There was a simple assignment, and I just had to fill in the blanks. But I found myself overthinking it. What if I color-coded it, bolded it, underlined it, or what else can I do to make sure that they see I'm putting in the effort they expect when it was simply filling in the blanks?

Situation three:

> Black women, in general, have to deal with many societal influences. But also, the pressure of ensuring that all our work fits into that standard or that stereotypical black excellence we have for ourselves is exhausting! It's built into our subconscious.

Situation four:

> I still hold my professors in high regard, but it's a matter of them needing to hear your opinions and thoughts. Hearing multiple perspectives on an issue is beneficial. I adapt as a student; I'm not a one-trick pony because there's no one way of thinking. There are diverse ways of acquiring intellect, so when I receive those comments, I also implement my thinking, perspective, and lived experience.

Participant 9's insights about the pressure of working ten times better than her counterparts, the invisible regulations that black women must meet, and the work of black women need to fit into the standard of stereotypical black excellence were associated with letting go of baggage. The relationship between her references to invisible regulations that black women must meet; standards of stereotypical black excellence; and not being a one-trick pony and implementing her thinking, were associated with having confidence in her black woman identity. Her comments were considered a rejection of the harm caused by gendered racial experiences and therefore creating her own identity.

In summary, all four participants (1, 2, 5, and 9) to varying degrees described the harmful effects of not letting go of the baggage of gendered racial experiences, whether those experiences are from subconscious biases of others or internalized oppression among black

women. Specifically, Participant 5 discussed how assumptions, biases, and stereotypes cause harm.

> It's like a knot and then a cycle of these events that you are unaware you're doing…. It is just you're so used to it. So, you can limit yourself by not being self-aware of negative energy. And you can become limitless when you are more aware of your self-identity.

These participants described how gendered racial experiences could create harmful unhealthy psychological stress, lead to an identity crisis, and even further, result in isolation and academic disengagement. When participants were asked how they responded in these situations, some preferred to be silent in rejection of the expectations or assumptions. In contrast, others chose to declare they do not speak on behalf of others or to challenge the expectation or assumptions themselves if they were explicit. Challenging the expectation that you speak on behalf of all black women was a rejection of assumptions based on gendered racial biases. Challenging the expectation was also a means for creating self-identity, declaring autonomy, and showing student grit.

Also implied within Participants' 1, 2, 5 and 9's experiences was the notion that student effort concerning black women was the additional effort needed to refute assumptions, biases, and stereotypes imposed by others or reinforced by other black people. Implicit in the research participants' experiences was that there is no additional effort needed to achieve academic success if their academic experiences were representative at the same level as every other student's lived experience. Therefore, the onus was on the institution, the faculty, and the administration to deliver an equity-based academic experience. However, on the part of these four participants, letting go of past experiences and creating student-centered self-identity was

critical to preventing and hindering their academic engagement and success. In short, it is a two-way street. While participants expressed the importance of representation of their gendered racial identity, representation was not exclusive to their identities; it also included representation of the diversity of their lived experiences.

Theme 2: Developing Self-Agency

Self-agency refers to tapping into those innate and gendered racial experiences to develop self-sustaining action through building connections and focusing on goals. Building connections refers to cultivating a network of academic, personal, and other support systems leading to feelings of belongingness. Focusing on goals refers to understanding and establishing purpose. Five participants made a total of 46 references to the theme of developing self-agency across three of the factors that influence black women and college satisfaction and academic engagement, including autonomy and self-determination (ASD), academic support services (AS), and student effort (SE).

Participant 1 reflected on her college-level math readiness and how she eventually excelled in her math courses.

> I always struggled with math, but I was required to attend study hall or tutoring as a freshman athlete. All of my friends decided on study hall, but I decided to go to tutoring because I was falling behind in math. I went there probably three times a week for two years. Even when it was virtual, I was on Zoom getting tutored. I ended up getting A's in both of my math classes.
>
> If it wasn't for soccer, I don't think I would have been there. Also, there were some instances on class assignments where I would get a low grade. I would address it with my professor, and they allowed me to make corrections to get a better grade. That definitely made me work harder. I just knew that I had to pass to stay eligible to play soccer, so that contributed to my academic success.

Participant 1 attributed her accessing the tutoring center to having limited options for student-athletes and that she wanted to remain eligible to play, ultimately leading to her working harder and earning A's in math classes. Her connection with her faculty and the tutoring center contributed to her working harder and achieving academic self-confidence. The relationship between these experiences and her goal to complete an associate degree in two years was associated with developing self-agency and three factors influencing black women's college satisfaction and academic engagement, autonomy and self-determination (ASD), academic support services (AS), and student effort (SE).

Participant 4 also reflected on her level of college-level math readiness and accessing academic support services:

> I remember reaching out for math help and going for additional tutoring. It wasn't hard because the advisors would reach out and check to see if you needed help. They would come at the beginning and midsemester of my math class. Tutoring was available late afternoon and evening, which was awesome because I took night classes. The fact that the advisors were all of different ethnicities makes it more awesome because not only am I different, but so are you.

Participant 4 attributed her accessing academic support services to her academic advisors, whom she identified with because of shared similar identity experiences, and that the resources were available at flexible times convenient for her schedule as a single black working mom attending night classes. Her advisor's understanding, appreciation, and cultural awareness of her experience as a black working single mother was part of Participant 4's motivation to build connections, access available resources, and put forth additional effort in her math college course and was therefore part of her developing self-agency. The relationship between

these experiences were associated with autonomy and self-determination (ASD), academic support services (AS), faculty trust (FT) and student effort (SE).

Participant 6 reflected on how gender-racial representation and a feeling of belongingness influenced her level of college satisfaction and academic engagement:

> Being at a four-year university compared to my community college was completely different. I don't see a lot of black women. It's not just other black people but seeing other races and having better representation. That was helpful at my community college because I saw women who looked like me, and I'm still connected with them today. Those resources are vital. That sisterhood that I had at my community college is not here, but I know I have people I can rely on. So even in my classroom, I find people that are like me, they don't have to look like me.

Like Participants 1 and 4, Participant 6's access to academic support services was through connections, but in her case, she just saw others who shared similar gender and racial identities. However, when she experienced the lack of gendered racial representation at her four-year university, she developed self-agency by relying on her former relationships or forming new ones to persist through the challenges of feelings that she belonged. The relationship between these experiences was associated with two factors influencing black women's academic engagement and college satisfaction: ASD and AS.

Participant 9 reflected on experiences where she did and did not find support at her community college. She explained how she reacted in both situations.

> Counselors and academic advisors are where I've had the lowest support. I didn't get to meet with any black women in those positions. I met with a black male advisor, who advised me to give up. However, I found support from staff members at the multicultural and student activities centers. There was a connection, as opposed to meeting faculty during office hours to discuss your academic performance. It allowed me to grow more as a person, especially when other students were going through similar issues. There was a time other black women walked in having a conversation about life, what we were going through and how it influenced and motivated us to keep pushing forward. That black girl magic was there.

Described in her on-campus experience was that despite racial representation in having a black advisor, Participant 9 noted the lack of gender-racial diversity in advising staff at her community college and the negative experience she had when advised by a black man. Also unique in Participant 9's reflections was the importance of interactions with student club advisors for on-campus social integration outside of the more formal student-faculty interactions. The informal social integration experience was described as just as or even more valuable than the student-faculty interaction. Finally, Participant 9's response highlighted the importance of gendered racial representation and the bond she formed with her fellow student colleagues. The relationship between and pattern of these experiences was associated with developing self-agency through building connections, and two factors that influence black women's college satisfaction and academic engagement, autonomy and self-determination (ASD) and academic support services (AS).

Participant 10 reflected on how aspects of her cultural identity were infused in the classroom content and curriculum and the skillfulness of one faculty member:

> She took the time to talk about Ebonics and African American vernacular and not let it be a footnote. She was driving deep discussion and then allowing there to be readings. That was a shift because I didn't realize I needed to hear that validation. She talked about code-switching and all of those things I had learned to do in language and my life, but she gave voice to it, which was very meaningful. So, I was excited to come to class. She did a masterful job of giving voice to voices different from her own and even acknowledging her lack of knowledge. That affirmed me as a black woman and elevated my view of the black language.

Participant 10's experience relevant to the importance and effect of culturally relevant andragogy on academic engagement is noteworthy. Particularly of interest was her acknowledging that it was skillfully facilitated by a faculty who does not represent the voice of

others she is teaching. Her faculty's acknowledgment and self-awareness of her lack of experience, yet facilitation of academic rigor, inspired academic engagement and validation of the African American vernacular for Participant 10. In particular, Participant 10's reference to how seeing her cultural identity reflected in the curriculum was affirming as a black woman was associated with developing self-agency. The relationship between these experiences was associated with two factors influencing black women's academic engagement and college satisfaction: ASD and AS.

In summary, these five participants demonstrated self-agency by establishing strong student-faculty/advisor interactions, which helped support access to academic support services such as tutoring and informal support networks with classmates and club advisors who had similar gendered racial experiences. This formal and informal interaction formed bonds, contributing to feelings of belongingness. Faculty and staff demonstrating cultural awareness and culturally relevant andragogy resulted in academic engagement. Gendered racial representation among faculty, staff, and students were noted as valuable to taking advantage of academic support services. However, diversity in experiences, not exclusively gendered racial representation, also contributed to participants' academic engagement. Finally, some participants successfully developed self-agency through informal and external networks outside the college when it was not readily available at their institutions.

Theme 3: Navigating Learning Experiences

Navigating learning experiences refers to being agile while understanding the role of self-awareness, personal experiences, and interpretation of those experiences in deciding how

to traverse academic engagement in the context that it is experienced. The context that is experienced refers to accepting social conditions and experiences that are outside of a student's control, whether they are stereotypes and biases or the lack of ability to empathize due to the limitation of lived experiences from other students, faculty, and staff. Acceptance does not convey agreement but only accepting that you have no control over the other person's perceptions.

Six participants made a total of 52 references to navigating learning experiences across all four factors that influence black women and academic engagement: autonomy and self-determination (ASD), faculty trust (FT), academic support services (AS), and student effort (SE). Four of the six participants who made references to navigating learning experience are discussed below as the other two participants' (9 and 10) references were also related to Theme 3 — the feeling of being dismissed and Theme 1 — the use of stereotypes under section Essay Results and Analysis — Classroom or on-campus Experiences respectively.

Participant 2 reflected on two experiences and how she responded in both situations:

> Last semester I had two instructors, one I trusted a lot. She cared about our class and me as a student. I was willing to participate and share personal information or make simple connections. You have to show me that I'm not going to feel weird about sharing parts of myself. I did positively because of it.
>
> The instructor tried his best in the other class, but I did not trust him. I didn't feel safe asking questions and dreaded going because we didn't have a positive relationship. When I asked questions, he was short, aggressive, ornery, maybe. I don't think it targeted me, but it was his general demeanor. Participation in his class was also important, but I kept it to a minimum. I'm not sure that it affected my grade hugely. I just powered through even though I felt uncomfortable with the instructor. I would still try to participate when I felt like I had it in me that day.

Participant 2's comparison of her two classes demonstrated how she navigated her academic engagement based on her faculty's demeanor, class management style, and level of comfort with the two faculty members. Her ability to adjust her engagement in response to the feeling she gets from her faculty in the two classes showed agility in understanding the context for both classroom experiences — part of the theme of navigating learning experiences. Her stated, "you have to show me that I'm not going to feel weird," and in exchange, she was willing to share personal aspects of her life, as though it was part of a negotiation. Her reference to just powering through was associated with student effort (SE). Conversely, Participant 2's reference to her faculty's response being "short, aggressive, ornery, maybe," but that she did not think it targeted her, was associated with putting the experience in the context of his general demeanor as well as faculty trust (FT). The relationship, sequence, or patterns between these two classroom experiences and her responses to those feelings determined her level of student effort (SE). In the class where she trusted her faculty, her engagement was higher. However, anxiety and minimum engagement were the outcomes in the class where she did not feel comfortable with her faculty.

Participant 3 reflected on the dynamics between academic engagement, her gendered racial identity experiences, and faculty feedback:

> Often when it comes to academics, I let myself go where energy flows to help propel me to success in that class. Some of that comes from my black experience or female experience lens, and I'm not going to shy away from that. The feedback I get from you is on you, but I'm going to do me as respectfully as possible.

She further explained the process for responding to her classroom experiences:

> It's balancing internalized stuff and not resonating internalized stuff within other people. Also, doing you, but subverting expectations, being aware of stereotypes, and

> tiptoeing around those. It's like waffling between tiptoeing and I don't care or appearing to be an angry black woman. But also not appearing meek and letting people trample all over you.

The relationship of Participant 3's reference to "letting myself go where the energy flows to help propel me to success" and awareness of her past gendered-racial experiences and "internalized stuff within other people" demonstrated her process for navigating her learning experiences, specifically understanding how her gendered racial identity influences her academic journey. Her process of self-awareness and understanding others she comes in contact with reflects the context in which she navigates learning experiences. Her reference to doing you but subverting low expectations showed her awareness of perceptions outside her control. However, awareness of those perceptions is key to how she waffles and tiptoes between those perceptions and learning experiences. The relationships between Participant 3's logic and rationale for navigating these experiences were associated with factors influencing black women's academic engagement and college satisfaction: FT and SE.

Participant 4 reflected on her experiences with processing faculty feedback.

> Most people would be, you're right because it's coming from the professor, but not me. Because not all the time can they see your point of view. Maybe I'm coming from an angle you haven't heard yet or don't understand.
>
> Sometimes I'll listen to my professors like, you know what? I did have a little trouble writing this paper; you could be right. Let me re-evaluate some things. But suppose I felt like I put my heart into this assignment, and a professor came out with feedback that's on the opposite angle of what I was trying to do. In that case, I will submit it anyways and then grade me accordingly because I'm giving you what I believe is my best work.

Participant 4 explained that while she generally trusts faculty, she said it was her nature to challenge faculty feedback, which was associated with faculty trust (FT) and understanding context — part of the theme of navigating learning experiences. However, she also indicated

that it comes with putting forth the effort and work into her assignments (or student effort [SE]) and then having confidence in her academic ability, even when others in authority do not. Further, she explained that she engages with her faculty regularly in most of her classes and provided an example of an experience when her instructor offered criticism about her assignments who taught her the importance of having confidence in her academic abilities:

> I had a professor who told me a while ago that I just wanted to see if you would back down. And that stuck with me, which is probably why I am the way I am now.

When asked how much her disposition to challenge feedback is relevant to her gendered racial identity, she explained that while she is keenly aware of gendered racial differences, those differences are not primary motivations for challenging feedback. Rather, it was having confidence in her academic abilities, which was associated with autonomy and self-determination (ASD). The relationships between Participant 4's descriptions of how she processes faculty feedback were associated with three of the categories of factors that influence black women's academic engagement and college satisfaction: ASD, FT, and SE.

Participant 5 reflected on her experience with a student group advisor and a different experience with a faculty member:

> In the past, I did too much trusting, and I had a negative experience participating in the student club, which created a wound of not knowing if I could trust.
>
> One time, I talked to my instructor and told him personal things that were going on in my life because I had to miss class a lot, and he seemed compassionate.

She further explained whether a positive relationship with her faculty or advisor would result in her accessing academic support services or trusting faculty feedback:

> I'm aware that people can come off as compassionate and friendly but may have alternative motives. So, I keep it at a professional level, surface-level things.

In this scenario, Participant 5's willingness to trust is maintained at a transactional level, meaning that she explains her situation in exchange for leniency related to her nonattendance. Her willingness to trust is less relevant to her gendered racial identity but rather directly is tied to whether there is a level of understanding of her experience. The relationship between understanding her experience as a black woman and her willingness to trust were associated with faculty trust (FT).

CHAPTER SUMMARY

These four participants demonstrated the theme of navigating learning experiences using various tactics and strategies to negotiate their engagement and effort around their classroom and on-campus environments. Those tactics included self-awareness of their own past experiences, awareness of perceptions outside of their control, and waffling between those experiences and perceptions to navigate their learning experiences. Being careful not to assess every experience the same, participants contextualized experiences around faculty and advisor interactions. The participants' responses to their experiences negatively and positively affected their engagement. Negative implications were putting forth a minimal effort to pass a class or having transactional academic engagement experiences rather than transformative ones. Positive implications were willingness to be vulnerable to gain a sense of belonging and academic confidence. The relationship between trust, faculty and administrator interactions, and positive academic outcomes was a two-way relationship, meaning that when safe environments exist, these participants were more willing to engage in the classroom and on-campus activities and open to transformational relationships. Finally, reasons for navigating

learning experiences were to avoid or denounce stereotypes, to dis-identify themselves from the feedback, or to appreciate and value their student-faculty interactions.

These findings demonstrated that the black women who participated in this study used their reflections on past experiences in their backgrounds and college and campus experiences to establish their identities as black women and forge a forward path to overcome academic and personal challenges. Despite describing some of their experiences as taxing and causing fatigue that resulted in some measured academic disengagement, all were self-assured that educational attainment and their experiences were part of achieving a true and unique identity. Participants had a particular way of making their institution work for them to fit their circumstances that did not consistently align with traditional predictors of student persistence and college satisfaction. Those specific traditional predictors are classroom and campus social integration. All ten were resilient and resolute even after having negative college and campus experiences to persist, to re-enroll after stopping out, or power through to achieve a purpose beyond a college credential.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

INTRODUCTION

Included in this chapter is a discussion of the analysis and observations from the participant essay narratives and interviews related to the lived experience of black women attending college. The discussion of the analysis and observations is organized around two data collection methods. The first was based on the ten participants' essay narratives about their classroom and on-campus experiences from which three themes emerged. The second was based on the ten participants' interviews related to four factors that influence black women's college satisfaction and academic engagement: (1) autonomy and self-determination, (2) academic support services, (3) faculty trust, and (4) student effort. Three themes emerged from these analyses and observations. This is followed by a discussion of this study's theoretical frameworks and a student engagement model noted in the literature review that was most relevant to this study's target population — that is, black women attending college. Finally, this chapter presents the study conclusions, which include a summary of this study's research findings, recommendations for future research, and reflections on the research approach and analysis for this study.

ANALYSIS AND OBSERVATIONS BASED ON THE TEN PARTICIPANTS' ESSAY NARRATIVES ABOUT THEIR CLASSROOM AND ON-CAMPUS EXPERIENCES

THEME 1: THE USE OF STEREOTYPES

Many participants described being subjected to stereotypes that were associated with causing psychological distress. They described these situations as taxing and causing fatigue, resulting in measured academic disengagement or limiting social integration. Notably, all ten participants described levels of college dissatisfaction because of projected stereotypes, whether at a community college, four-year, or graduate-level institutions, that affected how they currently engage academically. Overall, experiencing stereotypes while enrolled in college was summarily considered by participants as a reflection that their institution was historically designed without respect for their identities and therefore not assumed to be a welcoming place for them.

Participants also reflected on how they saw stereotypes perpetuated through family upbringing and how those stereotypes are carried out by other black faculty, staff, or students at their institution. This was most explicit in participant 5's and 9's essay narratives. Participant 5, who served as a student club president, described an experience with the student club advisor, who was also a black woman. In this scenario, the student club advisor projected the stereotype of the strong black woman as controlling and dominating making Participant 5 feeling pushed around which ultimately led to her resignation as student club president. Participant 9 described her family upbringing as the pressure of fitting into the perfect black woman image, one who is constantly poised and articulate, strong, and rarely in need of support. She then described how this stereotype influenced her hesitancies to seek academic or

emotional social support when needed. These observations are consistent with Collins' (1986) and Tatum's (2017) assertion that the positive self-definition of the strong black woman and the ideal black woman are embedded in historically sexist and racist assumptions projected by dominant groups and can prevent black women from seeking academic and other supports that lead to persistence.

However, despite participants' experiences with stereotypes, all projected a sense of resiliency through building connections and cultivating a network of academic, personal, and other support systems. Participants revealed several coping mechanisms to deal with gendered racism, including overriding or canceling the encounter as a form of resistance. Lewis et al. (2013) found black women college students who experienced microaggressions and stereotypes demonstrated resistance by addressing the experience at the point in which it occurred or demonstrated resistance by avoiding future experiences where microaggressions may or are likely to occur.

In my study, overriding or canceling microaggressions or stereotypes, which is the process of deciding the risks and benefits to addressing the experience, was parallel to resisting the oppressive situation. As observed in Participant 3's experience, her classmates' inappropriate gendered racial curiosity about her hair routine did not rise to a sufficient level of benefit of a direct response and therefore her decision was to override or cancel the experience, meaning her decision not to respond. This was also evident in Participant 5's decision to disengage or resign as the student club president after feeling pushed around by the club advisor. Although Szymanski and Lewis (2016) asserted that gendered racism and the use of stereotypes are associated with detachment from support systems, this study's observation

supports the notion that black women's college experiences are not monolithic, as all participants in this study remained academically engaged while learning to navigate these experiences and using a variety of coping strategies to address microaggressions and stereotypes.

Theme 2: The Presence or Lack of Diversity

The presence of diversity had a positive influence on participants' classroom and on-campus experiences. This was prominent in Participant 1, 4, 6, and 10's experiences. Participant 1, who identifies as a biracial black woman, referenced on many occasions how diversity at her community college transformed her academically and personally. She attended full time and was a student-athlete, contributing to her academic success. She specifically noted how the presence of diversity in race, age, and experience of her classmates, faculty and staff helped to develop confidence in her black biracial identity and her confidence as a student.

Participants 1, 4, 6, and 10 all referenced the value of campus diversity and the importance of a strong sense of racial identity as key to their development as students, particularly attending a predominately white institution (PWI). Participant 6 described a classroom experience where there was cultural diversity and how it contributed to her comfort with being open, being engaged in classroom discussions, not fearing judgement, and knowing her opinions would be respected. Even further, Participant 6 indicated that although her experience at her four-year institution lacked the level of diversity at her community college, seeing other races and seeking out other students who do not look like her but appreciate her experience as a black woman contributed to success at her four-year institution. These

observations align with Collin's (1986) and Tatum's (2017) assertion that participation and balance of the dominant culture with their own is a strategy used by black women to succeed academically and professionally.

In the case of a lack of diversity, participants deliberately sought out social engagement with other students of color, affinity student clubs and organizations, or finding support outside of their college that affirmed their self-concept. This was described as a strategy that helped them cope with gendered racial experiences and the lack of diversity on their campuses. Moreover, some participants described the lack of diversity as motivation to focus on their goals for attending college. This is consistent with Robinson et al.'s (2013) assertion that when black women experience the lack of diversity on their campuses, they seek out and form bonds with other black or racially diverse student groups who help form their black woman student-centered identities. These black women's student-centered identities were developed to defy the negative and offensive institutional structures and expectations that do not align with their self-perceptions. For example, Participant 6 described her experience at her four-year institution and being enrolled in the physical therapy program, a career field typically dominated by white men, and how her experiences contributed to her insecurities, anxiety, fear of failure, and feelings of isolation. She described how these experiences resulted in her feeling she had to constantly prove herself when relating to other students and staff. Participant 7's coping strategies for these experiences were to seek out same racial identity student clubs and groups, such as the black student union, college choir, and other black senior classmates outside of her program. Seeking out same racial-identity student groups helped her

be grounded in her racial identity and allowed her to reaffirm her student identity in a program dominated by white men.

Theme 3: The Feeling of Being Dismissed

Two participants described dismissive experiences as denying their identities as black women as worthy of personal dignity. Participants 2 and 9 provided a total of three classroom or on-campus examples of this theme. Participant 2's experience was with a male student taking photos of her without her consent and the college administrator who attempted to explain away the situation by questioning the participant's desirability as a black woman. Participant 9 provided an example where she was running for student trustee at her four-year institution and an interviewing college trustee smugly diminished her community college experiences. Both participants specifically claimed these experiences reflected gendered racism resulting in Participant 2 expressing her discontent and desire to depart her community college. Participant 9 indicated her disillusion that higher education is a place that provides economic opportunity and personal growth for all. Both were explicit about the long-term psychological harm caused by these experiences and explained the potential damage that could be caused by living up to the stereotype of the strong black woman who can somehow withstand an inordinate level of perpetual oppression.

ANALYSES AND OBSERVATIONS BASED ON THE TEN PARTICIPANTS' INTERVIEWS RELATED TO FOUR FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE BLACK WOMEN'S ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

Theme 1: Letting Go of Baggage and Creating Self-Identity

This theme evolved among the various ages and backgrounds of the participants and was observed most frequently through the participants' ability for reflection and appreciative

inquiry, a positive and strength-based approach to challenge themselves to overcome their past gendered racial experiences. This is consistent with Gushue and Constantine's (2003) assertion that black women enrolled in college were found to rely on cultural and personal values for overcoming past experiences.

Participants 1, 2, 5, 8, and 9, ages 22, 26, 32, 53, and 21, respectively, practiced self-reflection to make sense of past and current experiences and create a path forward. The participants' narratives revealed their keen awareness of the stereotypes, biases, and assumptions that underlie their gendered racial identity and how they are careful not to allow past and current experiences to hinder academic success. For example, Participant 1, who identifies as a biracial black woman, described feeling that her classroom participation or comments were presumed to represent all other black women and how she would ponder the whole day on whether she said the wrong thing. However, she expressed the need to let go of those feelings as they negatively affected her study habits, distracted her focus on assignments, and adversely impacted her learning, specifically her grades.

Alternatively, Participants 1, 2, 5, 8, and 9's interviews revealed adeptness at establishing their own black woman student identities. In Participant 1's case, she developed comfort in her gendered racial identity as a biracial black woman and was highly engaged in college athletics, student employment, and her academics and graduated with a 3.9 GPA. This was also the case for Participant 9, as she described her resistance to the pressures of meeting stereotypical standards of black and academic excellence perpetuated in her family and society generally. Her resistance resulted in developing confidence in her own definitions of black academic excellence and understanding the value of her individual experience as a black

woman in class discussions. Participants 1 and 9 were highly engaged students, attending their community college full time, completing their associate degree in two years, and completing their bachelor's degree in an additional two years.

Participants 1, 2, 5, 8, and 9's use of self-reflection and adeptness in establishing their own student identities was consistent with Rose et al.'s (2014) and Gushue and Constantine's (2003) research that showed a strong sense of autonomy and self-determination (ASD) among black women attending community colleges and those attending predominately white institutions, respectively. Gushue and Constantine's (2003) study used Triandis and Gelfand's (1998) definition of horizontal individualism as someone who respects their distinctive characteristics while those same distinctive characteristics lend themselves to social order. Gushue and Constantine's (2003) use of this definition was parallel to what they determined or defined as autonomy and self-determination among black women enrolled at predominately white institutions and who persisted. Said differently in this study, Participants 1, 2, 5, 8, and 9 resisted the notion that gendered racism and stereotypes from their past and current experiences would determine their future. Rather, these participants forged a path forward by creating autonomous student identities that allowed them to adapt to the social order of their campus by putting their energies and efforts into studying hard, building relationships with faculty, and socially integrating when necessary to complete their educational goals.

Theme 2: Developing Self-Agency Through Building Connections and Focusing on Goals

Participants often reflected on identifying with faculty or advisors who looked like them or when those faculty and advisors made them feel that the circumstances associated with

their identities were understood. Building these connections was a form of developing self-agency. Participants 1 and 4 described their struggles in math courses and how they attempted to establish self-agency through building relationships with their faculty and advisors. Participant 1 stated that she had always struggled with math and how her relationship with her athletic coach, faculty, and advisors who were culturally diverse provided resources, guidance, and support that was attributed to her going to the tutoring lab, sometimes three times a week, unlike many of her fellow college athletes. Participant 4 reflected on her struggles with math but how access to advisors who were readily available at times that were convenient for her schedule had a significant impact. Her advisors, who reflected racial and cultural diversity, contributed to her feeling more comfortable reaching out and asking for help. She specifically attributed her access to academic support services to her academic advisor's ability to identify with her situation as a working single mother who shared similar experiences.

Access to academic supports (AS) was articulated in the form of positive outcomes from faculty demonstrating teaching and learning excellence through a culturally relevant curriculum. According to Bensimon (2005) and Ortiz and Boyer (2003), faculty facilitation of learning through culturally relevant and competent teaching was vital to racially underrepresented students' persistence. Participants 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 10 described the overall lack of their cultural identities in the college curriculum and how it affected their academic self-concept, but, when observed, how it positively affected their academic engagement. For example, Participant 10 described an experience where a non-black faculty masterfully and skillfully infused the cultural relevance and significance of Ebonics and code-switching in African American vernacular. She described how seeing her cultural identity represented in the

curriculum made her feel excited about coming to class and how affirming that experience was for her.

Nicholls et al. (2007) noted that even in the case of academically prepared underrepresented students, dissatisfaction with faculty and the lack of academic and social support are barriers to academic persistence. Participant 9, who was enrolled in an honors program at her community college and highly engaged in student leadership positions, described how she developed self-agency when experiencing dissatisfaction with her college experiences. She established self-agency through self-care, having affirmative statements that reflected her goals, and establishing support networks outside of her college that help her persist. Her coping strategies were associated with self-protective strategies and resistance while at the same time always being aware not to unintentionally affirm negative stereotypes associated with black women. As a reflection on these experiences, Participant 9 summarized her feelings in resistance to all types of stereotypes, whether perpetuated by racist and sexist assumptions or reinforced through family beliefs about the role black women should play:

> I feel like there is a certain black woman's image that she should have her Ph.D. and have long hair or natural, but should abide by society standards, or she's considered breaking from society standards. Being my own role model is something I've determined a mold for myself. We are all dishes who fit onto the dinner table no matter what ideal black woman we make for ourselves.

Theme 3: Navigating Learning Experiences and Understanding Context

Under this theme and unlike the other themes, faculty trust (FT) emerged as a moderating factor of the others. This observation was consistent with McClain and Cokley's (2017) assertion that faculty trust has a moderating positive influence on academic self-concept related to academic self-determination (ASD). This observation is consistent with Cole and

Griffin (2013), Romero (2015), and Yeager et al.'s (2014) assertion that faculty trust (FT) reinforces the development of academic self-confidence, access to academic supports services (AS), and motivation for student effort (SE) for black women.

Participants 2, 3, 4, and 5 all described how, based on their relationship with their faculty or advisor, they would navigate or modify their level of academic engagement or adapt how they engaged in the classroom or on campus. For example, Participant 2 compared her experiences in two separate classes with different faculty during the same semester, one of whom she trusted and the other she did not. Where faculty trust was established, she indicated willingness to participate, sharing personal information, and making classmate connections, thereby demonstrating student effort (SE). In the class where she did not trust her faculty, she would limit her participation to achieve what was minimally expected to pass the class. She used these scenarios to explain using context to navigate learning experiences based on her level of trust with faculty and advisors. McClain and Cokley (2017), Cole and Griffin (2013), Romero (2015), and Yeager et al. (2014) assert that faculty trust is foundational to academic engagement vis-à-vis meaningful student-faculty interaction, college satisfaction, and positive academic outcomes for black women.

Participants 3, 4, and 5 referenced how past experiences influenced how they navigated their learning experiences. Participant 3 shared how she navigates by stating, "It's a balancing act of processing internalized stuff and not resonating internalized stuff with other people." The internalized stuff was associated with her past gendered racial experiences, and the internalized stuff with other people was associated with those biases and assumptions made by professors or other college personnel that she had no control over. In her scenario, navigating

learning experiences required processing past experiences and being careful not to conflate or misapply those same experiences with current classroom and on-campus interactions that would possibly hinder her from achieving academic goals.

Further, within participants' narratives were explanations of the psychological toll resulting from navigating learning experiences based on their gendered racial identities and reconciling those experiences by establishing autonomy and self-determination, accessing academic supports, trusting faculty, and demonstrating student effort. In describing her feelings about how she navigates learning experiences, Participant 2 explained:

> Black women are expected to work harder than everyone else. But I don't think that makes me who I am. It's something that I'm doing in response to my surroundings. I'm doing it for survival. I don't want to be extra resilient. I just want to be myself and for the world to work for me as it does for others.

Moreover, in a different situation with a male student who took a photo of her without her consent and a college administrator dismissing this experience, Participant 2 explained the feeling of detachment by stating, "I trusted and believed my college cared about my safety until this. Now I'm anxiously counting down the days until I transfer." These experiences, in addition to building trusting relationships with faculty (FT) and studying for classes (SE) on their face, can be overwhelming.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT MODEL

Four theoretical frameworks were used for this study: black feminist theory, intersectionality theory, identity centrality theory, and stereotype threat theory. The student engagement model used in this study was Bean and Metzner's (1987) nontraditional and commuter college student engagement model.

Black feminist theory is a framework that helps understand black women's experiences through their intersecting identities, activism, self-definitions, and reflections (Collins, 2000). The ten participants' essay narratives and interview descriptions illustrated how their backgrounds and life experiences influenced their self-definitions as black college students who are nimble, complex, and self-assured. Particularly, Participants 7 (age 68), 8 (age 53), and 10 (age 47), more than the others, reflected personal experiences or references of lessons from their parents about the historical oppression of black people in general and black women specifically. These participants' coping strategies were almost not observable, possibly due to their self-assurance in navigating prior similar situations. Their classroom engagement was consistently described as limited to the extent of specifically passing the course, achieving a personal goal, or supporting other students rather than mere campus social integration. Reflections informed these participants' academic engagement and campus experiences on how they overcame life experiences as black women and a sense of self-assurance in their identity definitions as mothers, wives or partners, sisters, and friends. As a result of their experience and self-assurance, advocacy and activism emerged.

For the seven other participants who were 32 and younger, there were more references to the gendered racial classroom or on-campus experiences. The degree of salience in their identities varied based on the number of intersecting identities they claimed, such as biracial, gender fluid, lesbian, single mother, and ability status. For example, Participant 3 is a black gender-fluid lesbian with a chronic health condition and offered the most gendered racial college experiences. These observations were consistent with Thomas et al.'s (2011), Jackson's (1998a), & Settles's (2006) assertions that there are degrees of salience in black women's

identities concerning the coping strategies employed to navigate their experiences. Specifically, Participant 3 offered these references about her identities:

> Often when it comes to academics, I let myself go where energy flows to help propel me to success in that class. Some of that comes from my black experience or female experience lens, and I'm not going to shy away from that…. Wherever there's sexism, there's gonna be a woman of color who's getting it worse. But I try not to define my experience as a black woman by the many structural and cultural hurdles in my way, but rather by comradery among the marginalized communities I'm a part of — that is, black, woman, LGBTQ+, and disabled, and taking pride in collectively and intersectionally overcoming those systemic obstacles.

Two of the three domains of intersectionality theory as forwarded by Crenshaw (1991), were observed in this study. Crenshaw (1991) described political intersectionality as conflating gender and racial identity politics to be the same, a panacea for all black women, or a fallacy that black women share the exact definition of black womanhood. As previously mentioned, generational differences were noted, illustrating the development of the black woman student identity through gendered racial experiences and their journeys as black women. An example is Participant 1's self-definition as a 22-year-old biracial black woman whose experience was very different from Participant 7, a 68-year-old enrolled in leisure classes. In this case, while there are intersections of similar identities, that is, being a black woman, the differences in their age, experiences as a result of their age difference, and Participant 1 being a biracial black woman, their identities as black women are very different. Notwithstanding, there were common college experiences such as having a sense of belonging, experiencing racial and cultural diversity on campus, and being exposed to culturally competent faculty and staff that supported the development of their gendered racial identities and confidence as students.

Crenshaw (1991) also asserted that representational intersectionality reflects the historically negative images and stereotypes perpetuated about black women, such as dominating, superhuman, and angry. This was observed in several of the participants' narratives and descriptions in three ways. The first was reconciling their subconscious awareness of stereotypes with daily classroom or campus engagement. The second was when those stereotypes were being projected onto them by faculty, staff, and other students. The third observation was when participants were processing when and how to respond and attempting to avoid acting out those negative stereotypes. In any of these situations, stereotypes were consistently described as disruptive to their learning and damaging, particularly when experienced in the absence of culturally relevant academic support services and support network that allows them to explore and self-define their identities.

Concerning stereotype threats, Nadler and Komarraju (2016) found inconsistent outcomes of stereotype threats among black women college students and that providing greater autonomy and academic support services had a moderating effect on academic outcomes. This moderating effect was particularly evident for Participants 1, 6, and 9 as they all described forms of stereotype threat, yet remained enrolled full time, completed an associate degree within two years, and shared their experience and the importance of having self-defined identities. This was accomplished through being exposed to or seeking out culturally relevant academic support services, connections with empathetic faculty and staff, and social networks at and outside of their institution.

Reitzes and Burke (1980) asserted that college students who most closely associate their identity with the role of being a student are more likely to be socially and academically

integrated into the college. Their assertion parallels Participants 1, 6, and 9's college experiences as they were all traditional aged college students, enrolled full time, and engaged in curricular and extracurricular activities. However, Steele (1997) suggested that college students whose identities have been traditionally stereotyped or marginalized may have less salient student identities and therefore illustrate academic disengagement to maintain feelings of self-worth. While many participants in this study described their desire to disengage to avoid gendered racial experiences, they still considered themselves academically engaged in what was appropriate to their racial and gender identities, life situation, and circumstances, that being ability status, working parents, or financial situation. Put simply, academic engagement looked different to them when compared to traditional predictors of college success such as campus integration, semester-to-semester retention, or completion within 150% of the standard time to complete an associate's degree. In contrast to Steele's (1997) assertion that traditionally stereotyped students have less salient student identities and therefore are more likely to be disengaged to maintain feelings of self-worth, Participants 1, 6, and 9 remained highly engaged, and there appeared to be a positive correlation between positive academic outcomes or GPA and campus social integration. This study's observation supports and is consistent with Settles et al.'s (2009) finding a positive correlation between GPA and racial identity centrality for black students as demonstrated in their friendships with other black students and social networks as these three students did just that.

This study's analysis and subsequent observations were grounded in an optimal student engagement model relative to black women and academic engagement. To that end, the ten participants' essay narratives, interview descriptions, and reflections were juxtaposed against

Metzner and Bean's (1987) student engagement model that more closely aligns with underrepresented community college students' experiences.

In Metzner and Bean's (1987) student engagement model, three of the four variables are background, academic, and environmental, and they possibly affected academic outcomes, or engagement, and psychological outcomes, or overall college satisfaction. Although this study did not focus on GPA, if persistence or completion were measures of positive academic outcomes, nine out of the ten participants had completed one or combination of a postsecondary certificate, associate's degree, undergraduate degree, master's degree, and one had earned a doctorate; Participant 3 being the one exception. As these achievements in degree attainment demonstrate persistence or positive academic outcomes, this study's observations support Strayhorn and Johnson's (2014) findings that traditional models for understanding student satisfaction are less applicable to black women and that future models should include factors such as self-efficacy, academic self-concept, and students' perceptions of campus climate.

Metzner and Bean's (1987) fourth variable was social integration, which was a mitigating factor that directly affected the student's decision to drop out. In this study, social integration was not observed as a factor in determining participant drop-out. Rather, social disengagement was often described as an attempt to avoid gendered racism in the classroom or while on campus unnecessarily. Put differently, social integration was not a significant factor in achieving academic success beyond the classroom participation that was required. Even in the cases of Participants 1, 6, and 9, who were full-time students highly engaged in student activities and clubs and socially integrated, social networks outside of the college were often

mentioned as a source for building and maintaining their racial student identity. The overarching observation of Metzner and Bean's (1987) nontraditional and commuter college student engagement model in relation to this study was that it does not consider variables such as autonomy and self-determination, faculty trust, a fuller spectrum of academic support services, nor considers institutional variables such as campus gender and racial climate that affects student engagement and academic outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

There are five key conclusions based on the data analysis and results. The first is that the participants in this study demonstrated intrinsic motivation across their varied self-definitions of being a black woman attending college and their college experiences. The second is that participants expressed personal growth and development that was unique to their past experiences in their backgrounds and how they use those experiences to traverse their college experiences. Third, each participant used varied and situational coping strategies to overcome gendered racism in the classroom or on-campus that was responsive to their past experiences and their self-defined identities. Fourth, all participants consistently refined their self-definitions as resistance to stereotypes of black women and typecasts roles of black women generally and the ideal college student. Finally, this study's analysis and results supports Metzner and Bean's (1987) nontraditional and commuter college student engagement model, specifically that background variables have possible effects on college satisfaction and academic outcomes or engagement relative to black women enrolled in college.

Intrinsic motivation across varied self-definitions of black woman who participated in this study became evident in the three themes identified, particularly related to four of the five

factors that influence college satisfaction and academic engagement. Those three themes were letting go of baggage, developing self-agency, and navigating learning experiences. The four factors included autonomy and self-determination, academic supports, faculty trust, and student effort. While each participant described levels of dissatisfaction with their college experiences, all were internally driven to overcome self-imposed internal barriers or gendered racism experienced at their college. Most participants, when asked why they persist in the face of these barriers, had a response around achieving and developing their own identities as black women rather than an outcome or a college credential. To do so, letting go of past experiences that hindered the development of their identities were necessary in order to achieve self-agency. Establishing self-agency through demonstrating autonomy and self-determination, accessing academic supports, building trust of faculty and advisors, and putting in the student effort was part of navigating their college experiences.

The second and third conclusions are connected as observed in the participants' essay narratives and interview transcripts. Personal growth and development based on each participant's unique past experiences was fundamental to how they traverse their college experiences. Their past experiences as well as the situational context of the classroom or on-campus experiences were connected in determining how they responded to or coped with gendered racial experiences. The participants provided narrative descriptions that revealed positive and negative classroom or on-campus experiences related to their gendered racial identities. However, all ten participants were on a continuum of personal growth and development that was more self-defined than reactive to their past gendered racial identity experiences. In other words, all participants were on a journey of self-discovery that did not

allow their experiences to define them. Yet participants were keenly aware of social conditions, stereotypes, biases, and assumptions outside of their control, and together their past gendered racial experiences and situational contexts were used to determine which coping method they used to overcome the classroom or on-campus experiences.

Through the participants' self-reflections on their growth, opportunities, and challenges, they developed complex personalized identities. Their journeys through classroom or on-campus experiences reflected varied and situational coping and navigating strategies that were a skillful combination of passive, empathic, appreciative, direct, deliberate, and defiant tactics. Their self-definitions in the context of autonomy and self-determination, academic support services, faculty trust, and student effort were consistently a refinement of the predictive student behaviors of persistence and completion that are suggested in traditional student engagement models. For example, campus academic and social integration are considered predictors of student persistence and success. However, for these ten participants, campus academic and social integration was modified or limited to the benefit of achieving their intended academic goals rather than predictive measures of academic engagement and success that drive their self-definitions. To this end, the more that community colleges can offer classroom or on-campus experiences that are flexible, adaptive, and responsive to the diverse experiences of their students, the more opportunities students, particularly black women students in the context of this study, have to successfully navigate their classroom or on-campus experience around their situations and circumstances.

My research observations revealed both a sense of both independent and collective black women's self-resilience, which reflected that even among a single gender and racial

demographic, there is no one measure that can predict college persistence and satisfaction. All ten participants' essay narratives and interview descriptions were self-determined regardless of their institutions' ability to offer culturally relevant and gendered racially responsive curricula and experiences. That is different from saying that culturally relevant and gender-racial representation is not important nor contributes to academic success. However, these research participants demonstrated adeptness in establishing autonomy and self-determination, accessing academic support services, building trust with faculty, and being willing to put in the effort and discipline to achieve academically and personally.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The observations from this descriptive phenomenological study provided black women's perspectives on their classroom and on-campus experiences and how they engage academically. Based on a review of the literature, very few empirical research studies have focused on black women enrolled in colleges or universities, which was a prompt for deciding to do this research.

The limitations of this study were that it was conducted at a single institution. However, the research methodology, the analysis of written narratives, and two interviews with each of the ten participants provided depth and breadth in understanding their lived experiences. The participants in this study represented a broad spectrum of experiences from black women who were enrolled, enrolled within three semesters from the time of the field research, recently stopped out, and enrolled at their community college after earning bachelor's degrees and graduate-level degrees. Therefore, observations in this study may not be consistent with observations in future research studies with a narrower sample participant demographic.

Future research on black women enrolled in colleges may consider limiting their sample demographics to working black women, adult-age black women returning to college after life experiences, or only black women who have stopped out of college. Limiting the demographics in this manner may result in understanding the nuance of black women's lived experience concerning identifying more specific strategies supporting their college persistence or institutional barriers specific to black women's enrollment and persistence.

Research focusing on institutional barriers for women of color may complement other studies on the cultural, gender, and racial experiences of black women enrolled in college, thereby providing a parallel and aligned college experience that benefits all students. Future research on black women enrolled in college may consider comparing black women enrolled across urban, rural, and suburban community colleges and universities. These research criteria may also reveal geographical or external factors outside institutional control that influence black women's academic engagement and college experiences. Many institutional initiatives that serve underrepresented student populations are designed and implemented as a pilot model rather than at scale. Future research that includes a larger number of black women participants may reveal recommendations that specifically support underrepresented student populations at scale.

REFLECTIONS

Having worked in higher education for more than 15 years as an administrator and never in a faculty role or administrator with responsibilities of providing direct services to students, this study helped bring me closer to the student experience. Even more, researching the lived experiences of the ten black women who participated in this study provided insights

into the breadth and depth of the intersections of external factors, institutional factors, and gender and racial identities relative to academic engagement.

Intentionality was at the center of researching black women's academic engagement and college experiences and led to my use of the descriptive phenomenological research methodology design. Even further, and consistent with the research method of bracketing the researcher's presumptions on or about the research phenomenon, I was careful and deliberate in the process of reflection to separate any potential shared racial identity experiences. This was done not to conflate, diminish, or compromise the whole black woman perspective and experience. In addition, careful attention was given to not compare my study's observations with findings from the literature that compared lived experiences of black women with other gender and racial groups. The observations and learning from this study have been invaluable experiences in objectively seeking knowledge absent bias and assumptions. Many thanks go to the participants for sharing their journeys and experiences openly and with candor.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTERS

FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
1010 Campus Drive FLITE 410 Big Rapids, MI 49307
www.ferris.edu/irb

Date: March 2, 2022
To: Susan DeCamillis, EdD and Derrick Harden
From: David R. White, Ph.D, IRB Chair
Re: IRB Application *IRB-FY21-22-56 Black Female Community College Students: Gendered racial identity and student engagement*

The Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application for using human subjects in the study, *Black Female Community College Students: Gendered racial identity and student engagement(IRB-FY21-22-56)* and approved this project under Federal Regulations Exempt Category 2.(i). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Your protocol has been assigned project number IRB-FY21-22-56. Approval mandates that you follow all University policy and procedures, in addition to applicable governmental regulations. Approval applies only to the activities described in the protocol submission; should revisions need to be made, all materials must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to initiation. In addition, the IRB must be made aware of any serious and unexpected and/or unanticipated adverse events as well as complaints and non-compliance issues.

Understand that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and participant rights, with the assurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document and investigators maintain consent records for a minimum of three years.

As mandated by Title 45 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 46 (45 CFR 46) the IRB requires submission of annual status reports during the life of the research project and a Final Report Form upon study completion. **The Annual Status Report for this project is due on or before March 2, 2023.** Thank you for your compliance with these guidelines and best wishes for a successful research endeavor.

Regards,

David R. White, Ph.D, IRB Chair
Ferris State University Institutional Review Board

College of Lake County

Grayslake Campus

19351 West Washington Street
Grayslake, Illinois 60030-1198

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February 22, 2022

Derrick Harden
19351 W. Washington St.
Grayslake, IL 60031

Re: Black Female Community College Students: Gendered racial identity and student engagement
IRB Protocol Number 22.002

Mr. Harden:

The College of Lake County's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects has approved your research project, "Black Female Community College Students: Gendered racial identity and student engagement". This approval is valid for one year and may be renewed at that time.

This approval is based on a limited IRB review of your submitted IRB application, research protocol, study materials, and answers to questions posed by the IRB. Your project is considered exempt by the CLC Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the following standard exemptions in the Common Rule:

- 45 CFR 46 §46.104(d)(2)(iii) for research that includes interactions involving interview procedures in which the information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can be readily ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46 §46.111(a)(7).

The IRB is confident that risks to participants are minimized and that your data management plan includes adequate provisions to protect the privacy of research participants and to maintain confidentiality of data. Please note that any adverse events such as breaches of confidentiality or data security must be reported to me within 24 hours of each occurrence. In addition, any substantial changes in the research protocol during the course of this project should be submitted as amendments for IRB review and approval.

Regards,

Megan Lombardi

Megan M. Lombardi, PhD
Assistant Director; IRB Chair
Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Planning and Research
College of Lake County
847-543-2502
mlombardi@clcillinois.edu