A Qualitative Case Study Examining Women of Color’s Experiences as They Pursue A Criminal Justice Degree

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ABSTRACT

A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY EXAMINING WOMEN OF COLOR’S EXPERIENCES AS THEY PURSUE A CRIMINAL JUSTICE DEGREE

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This dissertation examined the experiences of women of color (WOC), defined as African American and Latina women for this study, as they pursued a degree in a criminal justice program at a Midwest community college. Utilizing Schlossberg’s transition theory, the qualitative case study sought to learn how WOC experience the transition to being students in a criminal justice program and the support and strategies they utilized to adjust to and navigate it. The study sought to fill a gap in the literature on WOC seeking degrees in criminal justice programs. The study also sought to learn more about student experience and how they transition into and through a criminal justice program.

Nine participants were interviewed at a midwestern community college located outside a major metropolitan area. Four primary themes emerged from the interview data analysis. First, participants’ extended networks shared concerns about their decision to go into law enforcement but also tried to provide support. Second, intersecting systems of oppression complicated participants’ transition to college as they held additional marginalized identities (e.g., first generation, low socioeconomic status, mother, employee). Third, participants felt like outsiders in their programs, so they looked for peer support from other WOC. Fourth, participants appreciated supportive faculty and resources provided by the institution but were often unaware of what the college offered. The study indicates that community college criminal justice programs should strive to foster a better understanding of the transitions experienced by WOC.
and provide better support to them. Community colleges should attempt to minimize barriers faced by WOC while participating in a criminal justice program and provide them information about how to use supports to overcome barriers.
A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY EXAMINING WOMEN OF COLOR’S EXPERIENCES
AS THEY PURSUE A CRIMINAL JUSTICE DEGREE

BY

DAVID J. DAMMON II
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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To my chair, Dr. Nyunt: I knew after taking your course that you were a perfect fit for me and for my dissertation. Your words of support, expertise in research, and desire for excellence were key to my successful completion of this dissertation process. I thank you for your overinvestment in my academic success. You were dedicated to my research for over a year and a half. I can never repay you for the extra time and effort you gave me.

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throughout my life were instrumental in encouraging me to always try to be better and not settle
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whatever I set out to do. You have shown me what a person can do when they set a goal, commit
to hard work, and keep resolute through to completion.

I love you both. I leave you with two quotes to ponder:

“Nothing important was ever achieved without someone taking a chance.”

—H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

“No man succeeds without a good woman behind him. Wife or mother, if it’s both, he is
twice blessed indeed.”

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the love of my life, the woman who made this all possible for me, Jacqueline Marie; you are my rock.
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PREFACE

A dissertation of practice is a scholarly endeavor that explores a complex problem of practice embedded in the work of a professional practitioner (Perry, 2015). The purpose of a dissertation of practice is to prepare students to become scholar practitioners who use practical research and applied theories to improve their practice while contributing to the knowledge base in the fields of higher education and student affairs. The dissertation of practice consists of three artifacts, as described here.

The first chapter is the dissertation of practice research proposal. The purpose of this chapter is to showcase the proposal that guided the research. The purpose of my dissertation was to examine the experiences of women of color (WOC) in a criminal justice program at a rural Midwest community college in order to understand the challenges WOC face in such a program and what they had to overcome to enter the program, persist, and complete it. I originally aimed to learn more about why WOC are not transitioning into criminal justice positions at a rate equal to their proportion of the population, especially in rural communities. During my time as both a police officer and a criminal justice instructor, I noticed that something was not working to bring WOC to the classroom and the profession. I wanted to do something about this issue through my work.

The second chapter is a manuscript for a scholarly publication. After conducting my dissertation research, I developed a manuscript that could be published in a scholarly journal in my field. The focus of the study shifted from my original proposal, and I decided to use
Schlossberg’s transition theory to examine the experiences WOC had while transitioning into and through the criminal justice program.

The third chapter is a scholarly reflection. In it, I reflect on the dissertation process and discuss applications of the research and newly gained skills to my professional practice and future engagement in research. I highlight that support during transition is needed by WOC in criminal justice programs. Faculty are positioned to provide support and offer directions on how to access support programs that would give further support to WOC students. Many of the barriers faced by WOC in the criminal justice program can be addressed through support by faculty and college services.
CHAPTER 1: DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

The United States is facing a cultural crisis with respect to its criminal justice system (Urbina & Alvarez, 2015). In the United States, law enforcement officers have traditionally been White men (Dukes, 2018). Law enforcement has come under scrutiny for the unbalanced ratio of White men to other minoritized groups in general, and especially for the low percentage of women of color (WOC) who are police officers (Yu, 2018). While Blacks and Latina/o/x are underrepresented on the employment side of the criminal justice system, they are overrepresented on its incarceration side (Urbina & Alvarez, 2015). This imbalance has intensified calls for a more diverse police force because having criminal justice employees with a diverse background creates an environment conducive to garnering trust and engaging with the community, particularly communities with a larger minority population (Hough & Roberts, 2005; Todak et al., 2018).

Individuals who identify as people of color have faced racism, bias, and unfair treatment by the criminal justice system in the United States and thus have rightfully developed a distrust of law enforcement (Burgess-Proctor, 2006; Salinas, 2015). Recent high-profile cases of police brutality involving people of color have further strained the relationship and trust between the police and communities of color (Li et al., 2021; MacLean, 2020). One reason there is a lack of diversity among police officers may be negative attitudes held by communities of color toward the police (Bolton & Feagin, 2004; Lim & Lee, 2021). Race is a strong predictor of people’s attitudes toward the police (Alberton & Gorey, 2018; Huang & Vaughn, 1996; Hurst & Frank,
People of color tend to hold less favorable attitudes about policing (Alberton & Gorey, 2018; Nation, 2011; Weitzer & Touch, 2004). An individual’s attitude toward the police is formed by different audiences, expectations, and experiences (Alberton & Grey, 2018; Nation, 2011; Weitzer & Touch, 2004). A person of color who wants to pursue a career in law enforcement often is going against expectations based on previous experiences with the police (Donohue, 2020).

When a person of color decides to pursue a career in law enforcement, they may face additional barriers to becoming a law enforcement officer. Criminal justice programs at community colleges play an important role in preparing tomorrow’s criminal justice professionals (Price & Sokoloff, 2004). Just like in police departments, it is important to have a diverse student body within a community college criminal justice program (Bartee & Lomax, 2007; Cooke et al., 2019). The primary recruiting goal of community colleges and law enforcement organizations is to assemble a group of criminal justice professionals who closely resemble the population of the communities they serve (Shjarback et al., 2017). Simply having a diverse student body may, however, not be enough to attract WOC into criminal justice fields. While there is a statistical connection between the number of students who pursue criminal justice degrees and the number of people who seek employment in that field (Murray, 2017), this may not always be the case. Students of color—WOC, in particular—in criminal justice programs are more likely to pursue a career as something other than a police officer (Yim, 2009). Further, WOC who attend a criminal justice program are more likely than men counterparts to pursue an advanced degree after attending a community college criminal justice program (Yim, 2003).
WOC face many challenges while in a criminal justice program, particularly at community colleges located in a rural or non-major metropolitan area. First, they are women of color going into a field where they are in the minority based on their gender, their race, and the intersection of the two (Yu, 2018). They may thus face gender discrimination and the notion often held by men in the program that women are less capable of performing police work (Helfgott et al., 2018). Men who are criminal justice majors may have unfavorable attitudes and not support women who are in that major (Austin & Hummer, 1994; Golden, 1981; Johns, 1979; Li et al., 2021). Second, WOC may face gender discrimination and racism while studying in a program and for an occupation where most individuals are White (Dukes, 2018). The intersections of sexism and racism may lead to unique barriers and attitudes toward them. Research highlights the relationship between the racial climate at a college and the successful graduation of WOC (Campbell et al., 2019; Fischer, 2010; Hurtado et al., 1999). More research on the experiences of WOC in criminal justice programs is needed to better understand how to support WOC during their time in college and foster a pipeline to law enforcement careers. If WOC have negative experiences and encounter barriers during their time in community college criminal justice programs, they may lose interest in a career in criminal justice.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to examine WOC’s experiences in a criminal justice program at a rural Midwest community college. I am particularly interested in how WOC experience the transition to being students in a criminal justice program and the support and strategies they utilize to adjust to and navigate the criminal justice program. The study will strive to answer the following research questions:
• How do WOC experience transitioning to and being students in a criminal justice program at a rural community college?

• How do WOC navigate barriers they encounter while transitioning to and pursuing a criminal justice degree at a rural community college?

• What support networks do WOC tap into to navigate barriers?

• What strategies do WOC use as they navigate these barriers?

**Review of Literature**

This study builds on literature on the experiences of WOC in community college programs and the barriers WOC encounter while completing their education. This literature review focuses on two main topics: WOC in criminal justice and WOC in college. The first two subsections look at WOC in criminal justice and their relationship to the criminal justice profession, the recruitment of WOC into that profession, and the reasons for the shortfall of WOC in that profession. The third subsection covers WOC in college and looks at the barriers faced by WOC in college, their experiences in community college, enrollment in criminal justice programs, and the experiences of WOC in those programs. The review ends with a critique of the existing literature, highlighting the need for this study.

**Women of Color in Criminal Justice**

The underrepresentation of WOC in the law enforcement and criminal justice professions should be a major concern for everyone. Dretsch et al. (2014) recognized that the law enforcement profession is still growing and wants to increase its minority representation, especially when it comes to WOC. Having WOC represented in policing is not only an issue of equal employment opportunity, but it also embodies the gendered nature of serving the public
A predominately male and largely segregated workforce hampers the services provided by criminal justice agencies (Donohue, 2020; Zhao et al., 2001). Another theory about why there need to be WOC in law enforcement emphasizes the new concepts of community policing, which include outreach, victim assistance, partnership with the community, and the overall philosophy of having officers who represent the citizens they are entrusted to police (Alizadeh, 2020; Mastrofski & Willis, 2010).

Communities of color do not want more minority officers for the sake of filling a quota; they want procedural justice. Therefore, colleges should recruit minority students into criminal justice programs who want to achieve procedural justice (MacLean, 2020). One of the primary resources used to locate and recruit prospective police officers is community college criminal justice programs because students in those programs have already shown an interest and affinity for helping others (Breaugh, 2021; Clinkinbeard et al., 2021; Gabbidon et al., 2004). Even though community colleges and law enforcement agencies have engaged in aggressive recruitment strategies to attract WOC to the profession, the results can be described as minimal at best (Jordan et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2013). Motivations for going into law enforcement have changed over time, and the recruitment methods used in the past to attract White men to law enforcement may not attract people of color to the profession today (Roberts, 2022; M. D. White et al., 2010). Researchers have concluded that recruiting strategies that are designed specifically to attract WOC to law enforcement are key to increasing the overall applicant pool (Donohue, 2020; Wilson et al., 2013).
Reasons for Underrepresentation of WOC in Criminal Justice

WOC and other minority applicants who choose to go into law enforcement typically indicate an interest in serving the community, being a role model, achieving financial security or prestige, fighting crime, serving communities of color, and increasing minority representation in the police department (Clinkinbeard et al., 2021; Perrott, 1999). More recent research shows that individuals, including WOC, whose personalities (e.g., extroverted and authoritative) or work experience (e.g., private security or previous military) align with the police profession are more likely to apply for law enforcement jobs (Clinkinbeard et al., 2021; M. D. White et al., 2010). These reasons for pursuing a career in law enforcement are, however, often overshadowed by negative perceptions of the police and barriers during the application and hiring process (Roman, 2020).

The relationship between the police and people of color continues to be strained (Roberts, 2022; Weitzer, 2015). Employment in the criminal justice field is currently not seen as desirable by many WOC (Rossler et al., 2019). Matters like racial profiling and the excessive use of force may discourage WOC from wanting to join the police profession (Clinkinbeard et al., 2021; Koper, 2004). Negative perceptions of the job and negative community reaction to high-profile use of force events may have discouraged WOC from pursuing careers in law enforcement (Campion & Esmail, 2016). Moreover, when people of color excel in education, they rarely see themselves aspiring to be a police officer or working in law enforcement. Rather, they seek employment in better paying and less dangerous professions (Hartman, 2015; Matthies et al., 2012).
WOC’s gender identity may intersect with their race and ethnicity and deter them from pursuing a career in law enforcement. Women police officers, and in particular WOC police officers, are still somewhat unknown to the layperson, especially in rural communities and non-metropolitan counties (Weitzer, 2015). Most people will never be stopped, questioned, or assisted by a woman police officer and encountering a WOC police officer is even rarer; thus, young WOC may not see policing is a possible profession for them (Weitzer, 2015). In addition, the use of force is commonly believed to be part of being an officer; women may be seen as not having the physical strength and imposing stature needed (Cuadrado, 1995; Felkenes & Schroedel, 1993; Morash & Haarr, 1995; Salerno & Sanchez, 2020). These gender stereotypes are incorrect. Moreover, modern policing relies less on force and more on tactics and verbal skills, which are unrelated to one’s physical stature or strength (Wright & Headley, 2020).

WOC may also encounter barriers as they consider or pursue a career in law enforcement. The number of WOC officers currently employed at a police department may influence the number of WOC applicants who are successful in obtaining employment as police officers (Todak & Brown, 2019; Warner et al., 1989; Zhao et al., 2001). WOC may not believe they can obtain employment in the criminal justice field and thus may not seek education in a criminal justice program (Kaste, 2014). Increasing educational requirements for applicants, particularly in larger police agencies, may have restricted the number of recruits. This effect probably is compounded by the economy’s draw on prospective applicants who have a college education (Koper, 2004). Another way to gain more WOC representation may be to revisit the required educational requirements and provide on-the-job training (Hilton, 2003; Todak & Brown, 2019).
The hiring process in law enforcement is difficult for everyone, but WOC may encounter unique obstacles and discrimination during the process (Chaiken & Cohen, 1973; Donohue, 2020; Perrott, 1999; Todak & Brown, 2019). Police departments regularly administer multiple-choice exams knowing the test is biased against people of color (Brodin, 2018). During the hiring phase, having an accent or ethnic-sounding name has been found to result in racial bias and lower the chance of receiving a response to an email by 50% (Arai et al., 2021). Attracting and hiring qualified WOC candidates is particularly challenging for rural law enforcement jobs; thus, many law enforcement agencies recruit individuals from far outside their jurisdiction to come and work in a rural area (Hoisington, 2018; Jordan et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2013).

**Women of Color in College**

Institutions were not created with students of color in mind and thus processes and procedures may not serve their needs. WOC have overall lower rates of college retention than White students (Gutiérrez et al., 2012; Romero, 2018). While some students of color report being unprepared for college-level academics, what the student and institution do to prepare students after they are at college matters the most in determining future academic success (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Porter & Byrd, 2021). Research has shown that campus climates, student involvement, and college settings that were not designed with students of color in mind are all factors associated with low retention rates among students of color (Chung et al., 2020; Doan, 2011; Kuh et al., 2006). Students of color often encounter barriers when they come into college that make it difficult for them to use their school’s resources for learning and personal development (Kuh et al., 2006; Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2020). A student’s inability to use resources can influence their decision to stay or leave an institution (J. Kim et al., 2021; Kuh,
WOC in college report experiencing feelings of being unwanted and even rejected from student organizations and extracurricular activities because of race (Hannon et al., 2016; Simpson & Bista, 2021).

The experiences of WOC in college emphasize the need to address the complexities of both racism and sexism when planning programs and resources that impact students’ college experiences (Malcom & Malcom, 2011). Colleges should further recognize the significance of understanding the multiple identities of college students, including race and gender, and how this affects the college experience (Mills, 2020; Stewart, 2010). Social science research suggests that WOC in higher education are not unaffected by the injustices that occur in the rest of society (Gutiérrez et al., 2012). WOC also report experiencing racism and feeling minority-related pressure while attending college (Leath & Chavous, 2018; Reynolds et al., 2010).

**Barriers Faced by WOC in College**

Social and academic power structures create barriers to student success, particularly for minoritized students such as WOC (Milner, 2010; Quaye et al., 2020). WOC students can face several barriers in college, such as lack of financial aid, no information about navigating the college process, bias, sexism, discrimination, lack of support from family or the college, a lack of mentors, and social issues including feeling isolated (Y. H. Kim, 2018; Loftin et al., 2012). There are also barriers that can be experienced by all women, including sexual harassment, discrimination, microaggressions, stress, and identity development (Helfgott et al., 2018). Bias and discrimination are barriers WOC will most certainly encounter, as many forms of them exist in both policing and education, but they are not always easily recognized (Lang & Kahn-Lang Spitzer, 2020).
The way schools disseminate information, or the expectations institutions have about what students know, can create barriers to student success that can be overcome with effective mentorship (Cooper & Liou, 2007; Turner, 2015). Having knowledge of the issues with these power structures and how they affect students can help students, instructors, and mentors resolve barriers (Yosso, 2005). Providing WOC with information about how the system works and the ability to access resources is a crucial part of developing their ability to achieve their aspirations in college (Liou et al., 2016).

**Experiences of WOC in Community College**

Community colleges enroll higher percentages of students from racially minoritized groups comprised of Blacks, Asians, and Latinos (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016; Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2011). As of 2009, students of color (non-Whites) made up 35% of all community college students, but only 27% of all students enrolled at four-year institutions (Reyes, 2011). In 2021, students of color (non-White or more than two races) made up 56% of all community college students (NCES, 2021). In 2010, WOC transferred at a lower rate than Whites from community college to university (Reyes, 2011). According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2020), in 2018 WOC still transferred at a lower rate than Whites from community college to university, but they had begun to close the gap.

There are substantial differences between two-year community colleges and four-year colleges (universities) that affect the experiences of students attending the institution (Whitehead, 2019). Most community colleges do not have dorms or housing and are considered nonresidential (Mullin, 2012). Because there is no residential life on campus, students at
commuter campuses tend to go to class and leave shortly thereafter, creating “commuter campus syndrome” (Whitehead, 2019). This syndrome reduces opportunities for students to engage with identity-based groups or to generate a sense of community. These factors affect the extent to which students can engage with on-campus resources (Ivory, 2012).

Recent research indicates that social and academic integration are critical variables for first-year students of color (Karp et al., 2008). Engagement, social and academic, is linked to academic success at community colleges; however, barriers may exist that prevent WOC from engaging (Waters-Bailey et al., 2019). Community colleges utilize high numbers of adjunct faculty (A. M. Cohen et al., 2014), who may be less able to provide academic support and engagement than full-time, tenure-track or tenured faculty. To improve experiences, retention, and degree completion, community colleges should have the following interventions available for WOC: mentoring programs, workshops on specific areas where WOC are underperforming to peers, early warning systems, and support groups (Johnson, 2001).

**Enrollment and Experiences of WOC in Criminal Justice Programs**

Enrollment in college criminal justice programs is quite popular among Black students who attend historically Black colleges and universities (Walton et al., 2015). As overall enrollments increase at a college, so do the enrollments for its criminal justice program and in all race classifications (Campion & Esmail, 2016; Dretsch et al., 2014; Walton et al., 2015). However, the increase in enrollment does not result in a significant increase in WOC criminal justice graduates moving into the law enforcement profession (Walton et al., 2015).

Not all students in a criminal justice program want to pursue the same career after graduation. Research on criminal justice students has found that men are more interested in law
enforcement after graduation, whereas women are more likely to pursue careers that call for an advanced college degree or they enter law school (Buckley, 1986; Collica-Cox & Furst, 2019; Krimmel & Tartaro, 1999; Todak, 2017; Tontodonato, 2006; Yim, 2009). This difference between students about which profession to pursue after graduation may create an environment that is counterproductive to a cohort’s environment and experience. WOC criminal justice students are less interested in law enforcement careers as police officers and often perceive themselves as being potentially less successful in the field than their men counterparts (Cambareri & Kuhns, 2018). They perceive this in part because of the belief that women police officers receive less respect, opportunity to advance, and acceptance from their fellow officers (Cambareri & Kuhns, 2018). They also perceive there is less potential for personal fulfillment and career success (Cambareri & Kuhns, 2018).

Having negative experiences in a criminal justice program may deter WOC from pursuing a career in law enforcement. While women are slightly overrepresented in college undergraduate studies overall, they are still a minority in criminal justice programs, which are dominated by men (Bystydzienski & Bird, 2006). The experiences of WOC in a college criminal justice program can encourage and support these women in continuing to pursue a degree and a career in a discipline dominated by White men (Helfgott et al., 2018). Living at the intersections of racism and sexism, WOC may encounter barriers related to their gender as well as to their race or ethnicity while in college (Stevens et al., 2018).

One of the known factors that leads to a positive experience in college is having a mentor from a similar background who has similar experiences and views (Gabbidon et al., 2004). Colleges and universities have increased the number of minority instructors, but they need to
continue to do so in order to increase the number of minority students (W. Edwards et al., 1998). There are few WOC with doctorates in criminal justice, and this underrepresentation means there are few role models to provide mentorship to encourage WOC to pursue careers in criminal justice (Heard & Bing, 1993). Having a diverse student body and providing educational support materials affects student interactions in a criminal justice program (Alcocer & Martinez, 2018). A long-standing issue with the books and instructional materials used in many criminal justice programs is that few minority scholars participate in the production and review of the materials; thus, WOC’s perspectives have been absent from the pedagogy of instruction in those programs (Adjapong, 2021; Eigenberg & Park, 2016). It is important for criminal justice programs to understand the experiences WOC bring with their unique individual, historical, political, and cultural contexts (Collins, 2004; Gainor & Forrest, 1991).

WOC may need assistance in determining what area of a criminal justice program to study. Collica-Cox and Furst (2019) found that WOC students are the most open to considering a range of career options within the criminal justice field. As they progress through their studies, their attitudes toward certain professions may be molded more by what they learn from their professors than by the media (Murphy et al., 2013). Colleges should provide WOC with support programs and policies that will foster their success and encourage careers in criminal justice (Jaumot-Pascual et al., 2021).

Critique of Existing Literature

Much of the peer-reviewed literature currently available on the experiences of WOC in law enforcement focuses on the outcomes of their education, employment issues, and the barriers they have faced. Most studies on creating diverse police departments have surveyed individuals
who had already become police officers or who had already decided to attempt to become one (Todak et al., 2018). However, there is a void in the literature about the influence of sexism and racism, specifically as they are associated with the experiences of WOC in criminal justice programs at community colleges (Watt, 2006).

Much of the existing literature on WOC in law enforcement uses a deficit approach. A deficit-based approach focuses on the weaknesses of individuals or groups to the extent that the individuals or groups become regarded as the problem (Hiemstra & Van Yperen, 2015). More research is needed that applies an asset-based approach to the study of the experiences of WOC in rural criminal justice programs and understanding how WOC navigate the barriers they encounter. More needs to be known about how faculty and staff can support WOC as they transition into criminal justice programs.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used in this study is Nancy Schlossberg’s transition theory model (TTM). This theory has been extensively detailed in several books by Anderson et al. (2012, 2022). This model has also been called to Schlossberg’s transition process model. Schlossberg’s TTM is usually classified as a theory of adult development (Evans et al., 2010). Schlossberg first laid out the TTM in 1984 as a transition theory that offered an appropriate interpretive framework for identifying and categorizing student experiences. The TTM focuses on situation, self, support, and strategies, which it calls the four Ss (Anderson et al., 2022).

The Schlossberg transition process model theorizes that adulthood is a time of change and growth characterized by transitions, crises, adaptation, coping, and stress. A transition is an event or nonevent happening in a person’s life that causes changes in their beliefs about
themselves and their situations. This in turn often requires changes in their relationships and behaviors with others. The outcome transforms relationships, practices, expectations, and responsibilities. Transition theory provides a method for appreciating what individuals experience during a transition period. If an individual does not place much importance on the change in an event or nonevent, then it cannot be considered a transition in this theory. The three types of transitions described in transition theory are:

- anticipated transitions (also known as expected events),
- unanticipated transitions (also known as unexpected events), and
- nonevents (events that were expected to occur but did not).

The context of the transition is determined by the individual’s relationship to the transition and the situation in which the transition takes place. The impact is defined by how the transition influences the individual’s life (Anderson et al., 2022; Goodman et al., 2006). Dealing with a transition involves a specific sequence of phases: moving in, moving through, and moving out (Evans et al., 2010). The individual’s positive assessment of the transition period is an important aspect of the coping process. Coping effectively during a transition depends on the individual’s assets-- the four Ss.

The four Ss provide an outline for an individual’s assessment process (Evans et al., 2010) and can be used to answer questions about the situation in which the women in this study found themselves, the supports available to them, how their personal characteristics affected their experiences in the criminal justice program, how they viewed their lives, and how they handled barriers while in the program.
The term *situation* describes what precipitated or triggered the transition. Situation looks at how the transition came about and under what circumstance it is happening. Situation also considers the circumstances behind the participant’s decision to go into a transition. Situation looks to discover whether any trigger precipitated the transition as well as other details about the transition, such as timing, self-control, duration, and role change.

The term *self* describes characteristics that can greatly influence how individuals perceive the transition process. The factors considered important in relation to the self are classified into two categories. The first category is personal and demographic characteristics. These affect how an individual views life, such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, stage of life, state of health, and ethnicity. The second category is psychological resources. These include ego development, outlook, commitment, and values. Self looks to discover what the participant brings to the transition and how they manage it.

The term *support* describes a person’s network of help. Support can come from any family member, a peer, a friend, or the institution. Support can be offered without being received or taken. It is important to understand whether the support is believed to be positive, negative, or neutral by the person. Support can be financial, emotional, encouragement, or mentoring. It can also take other forms of emotional assistance.

The term *strategies* explores aspects of coping with life problems. Strategies, or coping responses, are divided into three categories: those that modify the situation, those that control the meaning of the problem, and those that aid in managing stress in the aftermath.

Schlossberg’s transition theory will help me gain insights into WOC’s experiences in criminal justice programs from the unique perspective only they can provide. The four Ss were
used to shape this study’s interview questions. Schlossberg’s transition theory will focus this study on understanding the experiences of WOC in a rural criminal justice program. The key themes of this study are (a) experiences of WOC, (b) barriers faced by WOC, (c) strategies WOC use to overcome barriers, and (d) supports WOC rely on to navigate barriers. This study strives to provide insights into ways in which the college could provide support to WOC in its criminal justice program.

**Research Design**

To explore the experiences of WOC in a criminal justice program at a rural Midwest community college, I will use a qualitative case study design informed by a constructivist paradigm. The qualitative study findings will be presented in an interpretative way and be underpinned by Schlossberg’s transition theory model (Anderson et al., 2022). Qualitative inquiry allows a researcher to obtain a complete picture of an experience, situation, or case within a specific context and at a specific point in time (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Yin, 2015). Qualitative researchers explore how people interact with and experience their social world (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

The study will be grounded within constructivism. Constructivism, as an epistemology, is the belief that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is acquired through a process of active construction in one’s mind (Fox, 2001). Research is conducted through a constructivist lens “when the object of the research is to understand the phenomenon as it is seen and interpreted by the participants themselves” (L. Cohen et al., 2018, p. 34). Constructivism holds that reality is not one stable thing, as positivism believes; rather, reality comes from many different views and many different experiences (Schwandt, 2014). Constructivism is more
dynamic and subjective than positivism (Schwandt & Gates, 2017). Constructivism in research relies on individual perspectives and collects deep, descriptive data that produce inductive results (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Constructivism as a research method often uses conversation, which is facilitated by exchanges that occur during social interactions or by using interviews to gain knowledge and understanding (Applefield et al., 2000). Constructivism stresses the importance of individual perspectives in answering the same questions (Schwandt, 2014).

**Qualitative Case Study**

According to Merriam (1998), a case study focuses on holistic description and explanation of a clearly defined or bounded case or system within its real-world context. Merriam (1998) argued that the most important characteristic of case study research is defining the object of study—the case. Merriam (1998) described a case as an entity, unit, or phenomenon that has defined boundaries that the researcher can distinguish or describe.

I am using a case study approach, specifically a descriptive, single-case study (Merriam, 1998) to explore the experiences of WOC in a criminal justice program at a rural community college. Merriam (1998) said a descriptive case study should be very literal and holistic in its reporting of the findings and use deep, rich narratives to help the audience understand the issue, problem, or question. In alignment with a case study approach, I will try to get a good understanding of the case—the criminal justice program—and provide detailed descriptions of WOC’s experiences in the program.

**Case Description**

The case for this research study is a criminal justice program at a rural community college in the Midwest. The college offers associate degrees, certificates, and short-term training.
The community college sits on over 130 acres and is located within 60 minutes of a major city. According to the college’s Office of Research and Grants, over the last five years 26,787 students attended the college. The non-White students include all students who selected a race other than White (e.g., Black, Latino/a/x, Asian, Pacific Islander, and other). As of 2020, 57% of the students at the college identified their biological sex as female, 42% of the students identified as male, and 1% selected other or did not disclose their biological sex.¹ Thirty percent of the student body identified their race as something other than White. The total number of students over the last five years who identified as a female of color (defined in this section as females who identify as other than White; see fn. 1 regarding the use of biological sex over gender) was 5,896, or 22.01% of all students (see Table 1 for details).

### Table 1

Unique Headcounts FY16–FY21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Female non-White</th>
<th>Female White</th>
<th>Male non-White</th>
<th>Male White</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FY16</td>
<td>1,059 (20.5%)</td>
<td>1,773 (34.3%)</td>
<td>851 (16.4%)</td>
<td>1,493 (28.8%)</td>
<td>5,176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY17</td>
<td>1,063 (21.3%)</td>
<td>1,655 (33.1%)</td>
<td>885 (17.7%)</td>
<td>1,391 (27.9%)</td>
<td>4,994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY18</td>
<td>1,014 (21.5%)</td>
<td>1,593 (33.7%)</td>
<td>852 (18.0%)</td>
<td>1,267 (26.8%)</td>
<td>3,726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY19</td>
<td>958 (22.2%)</td>
<td>1,418 (32.9%)</td>
<td>801 (18.6%)</td>
<td>1,133 (26.3%)</td>
<td>4,310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY20</td>
<td>950 (23.5%)</td>
<td>1,346 (33.3%)</td>
<td>741 (18.3%)</td>
<td>1,004 (24.8%)</td>
<td>4,041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY21</td>
<td>852 (24.1%)</td>
<td>1,230 (34.7%)</td>
<td>607 (17.1%)</td>
<td>851 (24.0%)</td>
<td>3,540</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The criminal justice program at the institution is a 60-semester hour program that takes a full-time student two years to complete. The program offers students the opportunity to earn two different associate degrees, one in criminalistics and one in criminal justice. The program further offers six certificates in various criminal justice subspecialties. The courses are taught by active

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¹ The college’s Office of Research and Grants only collects information on biological sex and not gender. This lack of accurate representation of students’ gender limits our understanding of who the students at the institution are and adds to the erasure of individuals with minoritized gender identities.
and retired law enforcement professionals, with both practical and field experience taught in the classroom. Most students who are enrolled in the criminal justice program are not full-time students. The average time to completion for all criminal justice students is six semesters. Most students enrolled over the past five years were traditional students aged 18–24.

The total number of students in the criminal justice program over the last five years was 832. WOC (defined in this section as females other than White due the college’s statistical data collection methods) comprised 26% of all criminal justice students over the past five years. The number of students in the criminal justice program who self-identified as being a WOC was 218 (out of 401 women), so 54.36% of the WOC (Table 2).

Table 2
Unique Graduates FY16-FY21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Female non-White</th>
<th>Female White</th>
<th>Male non-White</th>
<th>Male White</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FY16</td>
<td>101 (15.9%)</td>
<td>275 (43.4%)</td>
<td>57 (9.0%)</td>
<td>201 (31.7%)</td>
<td>634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY17</td>
<td>173 (19.9%)</td>
<td>384 (44.1%)</td>
<td>31 (9.3%)</td>
<td>232 (26.7%)</td>
<td>870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY18</td>
<td>144 (20.4%)</td>
<td>281 (39.8%)</td>
<td>78 (11.0%)</td>
<td>203 (28.8%)</td>
<td>706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY19</td>
<td>156 (22.2%)</td>
<td>284 (40.5%)</td>
<td>85 (12.1%)</td>
<td>177 (25.2%)</td>
<td>702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY20</td>
<td>161 (20.9%)</td>
<td>324 (24.1%)</td>
<td>86 (11.2%)</td>
<td>199 (25.8%)</td>
<td>770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY21</td>
<td>143 (22.1%)</td>
<td>261 (40.3%)</td>
<td>71 (11.0%)</td>
<td>173 (26.7%)</td>
<td>648</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The criminal justice program at the college has had 86 graduates in the last five years. Only 20 of those graduates, or 23.26%, were WOC. There were 218 total WOC who participated in the program in the last 5 years, so there was a 10.9% completion rate in the program among WOC who began the criminal justice program in the last 5 years (See Table 3).

Students in the criminal justice program have access to several support programs provided through the college. Some of these provide services and support to all students, others only to women, and others specifically support people of color. One program that assists all students from enrollment through graduation is the guided pathways initiative. The guided
pathways program provides students the opportunity to choose a program of study with the coursework laid out in the preferred order to be taken. It creates a plan to either transfer to a four-year college or get a good job with a two-year degree (St. Amour, 2020). When students have a clear guide for what is required to complete a program, they are more likely to follow the program plan that lays out the most direct route to graduation (St. Amour, 2020). When students change programs and their completed courses do not align with a certificate or completion pathway, they may drop out because they cannot visualize a path to completion (St. Amour, 2020). The college also offers financial support through scholarships, childcare, transportation, and a food pantry for all its students.

The college also has an early warning system to identify students who are having issues with completing their program requisites on time. There is a Student of Concern form on the college website that provides the opportunity for faculty or staff to report an observation or concern about a student exhibiting academic difficulty, excessive absences from class, financial issues, injury or illness, personal wellness or mental health problems, unusual behavior, or other issues requiring attention. An advisor will review the alert and reach out to help the student with resources on or off campus, depending on the need.

Women going into the criminal justice field of study can obtain direct financial support for being enrolled in a nontraditional program of study. This financial support includes tuition, equipment, and free books. There are additional benefits for students who are single parents, such as funding for college and childcare expenses. Besides financial support, the college has developed student and cohort programs guided by faculty mentors that provide all students with
peer and educational support. These cohort programs focus on serving underrepresented student
groups such as WOC in programs like nursing, welding, criminal justice, and STEM.

Table 3

Criminal Justice Completions (Degree and Certificate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment type</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>FY17</th>
<th>FY18</th>
<th>FY19</th>
<th>FY20</th>
<th>FY21</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College only</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Non-White*</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school students</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taking college courses</td>
<td></td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Non-White is defined in this section as all races other than White due to the college’s statistical data collection methods.

Participants

To select interviewees, I will utilize purposeful sampling with a specific set of inclusion
criteria (L. Cohen et al., 2018). Because qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning of a
phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants, it is important to select a sample from
which the most can be learned (Merriam, 1998), which is called a purposeful sample (Merriam &
Grenier, 2019). The criteria to be included in the study as a participant are: (a) the participant identifies as being a woman, (b) the participant identifies as non-White, and (c) the participant has taken four or more criminal justice courses at the college in the past five years. The first two criteria were chosen to align with the individual characteristics needed to be part of the group whose experiences this study seeks to explore (WOC). The third criterion ensures that the participants attended the program at the site being studied and they participated in it for enough hours to have experienced a varied representation of instructors and courses. If participants meet the above criteria, they must also agree to participate in the study voluntarily. They will be offered no compensation for their time or information.

I will recruit participants for this study from lists of current and previous students who fit the criteria for the study provided to me by the Office of Research at the college. I will keep the participants’ personal identifying information confidential. To maintain confidentiality, I will not take personal identifying information in the notes for the study and pseudonyms will be used instead of the participant’s actual name during the interview and in any publications or reports based on the findings.

I will recruit participants via email. I will email all participants who respond to the initial inquiry that they are interested in participating in the study. The wording in the recruitment offer asks them whether they are interested in participating in a research study examining the criminal justice program at a college by agreeing to two 45–60-minute interviews about their perceptions and experiences with the program (Appendix A). I should note that the participants are not consenting to participate in the study at this point, they are simply stating they are interested in participating and are agreeing to be contacted with more information later. I will log the names
of the participants who express interest, along with their demographics and contact information. I will contact them with a follow-up email, in which I will explain the study, explain the consent process, have them provide an alias or pseudonym, and set an appointment for an interview. I will provide a written consent form (Appendix B) to the participant prior to the interview, which I will read to them. I will ask the participant to provide a verbal consent to participate in the research study prior to being asked any questions as part of the interview.

I have set my goal for the number of student participants in the study at eight because, according to InterQ (a company that does qualitative and quantitative research), a general recommendation is to have 10–20 participants in a qualitative study when one conducts interviews (Shetty, 2018). I believe the goal to have eight total participants in the study should provide a sufficient saturation of information because I will interview each participant twice. Research has shown a smaller sample size can possibly provide more detailed information (Malterud et al., 2016). A small sample size will allow me to gather rich, detailed stories and interpret enough information for coding that the study could be replicated.

Methods of Data Collection

I am going to collect data from two sources: interviews with students in the criminal justice program at the college and documents provided by the college. I will conduct two 45–60-minute interviews with eight participants. These will be semi-structured interviews, which are an exchange between an interviewee who answers the questions and an interviewer asking questions from a predetermined list of questions and follow-up questions (Longhurst, 2003; Ruslin et al., 2022). I will ask a list of questions to each of the interviewees, along with follow-up prompts to solicit more detailed information as needed. The interviews will focus on the experiences of the
student while she participated in a criminal justice program at a rural community college and how her identity as a WOC shaped those experiences. I will also ask what barriers were faced while in the program and what strategies and supports the interviewee utilized to navigate those barriers. Lastly, I will ask the participants about what services or supports they received from the college while participating in the program (see Appendix C for the interview protocol).

I will ask the interviewee for her consent to have the interview recorded. I will digitally record the interviews (via Zoom and digital recorder) and then transcribe the interviews through transcription software from Otter.ai. The digital recorder will be used mostly as a backup to capture audio responses during the interviews. I will compare the audio from the interviews to notes form the interview to corroborate the responses. I will then review the transcript for errors and compare it to my notes for accuracy.

I will also collect documents that relate to WOC and their participation in the criminal justice program at the college. I will examine the following documents:

- **Annual Data Book**: The *Fiscal Year 2021 Annual Data Book* presents key data points about the college. The report examines the effectiveness of the institution and provides demographic, financial, staffing, and performance information, along with relevant national benchmarks that help evaluate outcomes against peer institutions.

- **Criminal Justice Program Review**: A report completed every five years that is a summary of the program.

- **Enrollment History Report**: A document completed by the Office of Institutional Research at the college that details college and criminal justice program enrollments.

- **Student Survey (2019)**: Annual survey that assesses student satisfaction.
• **2021 Annual Report:** Provides demographic, financial, and other valuable information about the college.

• **Career Technical Education Plan:** A report detailing the Career Technical Education Department and the programs within it (criminal justice is an included program).

• **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Digest:** An annual publication that describes the diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, programs, and supports at the college.

I will ask for these documents from student services, TRIO, advising, admissions, tutoring, learning services, the Office of Information, and the Office of Instruction. I will also request documents and data from the college’s Office of Institutional Effectiveness that refer to college enrollment and retention over the past decade as well as information on retention programs, program student outcomes, utilization of tutoring and mentoring programs, and graduation rates.

These documents will contain data relevant to the participation of WOC in the criminal justice program. The documents will include information on tutoring, mentoring, financial assistance, special cohort initiatives, grade averages, demographics, and the criminal justice program. Collecting these documents will allow me to provide a more detailed description of the case and the criminal justice program.

**Data Analysis**

I will conduct data analysis on the interviews and the documents collected from the college. Data analysis is “the process of making sense out of the data...[which] involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning” (Merriam, 1998, p. 178). Qualitative data
Document Analysis

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for gathering, organizing, reviewing, and evaluating printed and electronic documents (Bowen, 2009). Documents can assist in uncovering meaning, understanding, and insights (Merriam, 1988). Data analysis of the documents in this study will allow me to take a deeper look into student support programs offered at the college. Having a good understanding of these student support programs will allow me to ask detailed follow-up questions if a participant mentions one of them in her interview. For each of the programs offered, I will look at documents to learn more about what the program is, how it works, the demographics of students who participate in it, and how it works with the mission and goals of the college. I will compare WOC participation rates and completion statistics to other classifications of students, as well as how this relates to the WOC in the criminal justice
program, to see whether there is a relationship to the interview data. These documents will provide useful background and contextual information for the description of the case and the context of WOC’s experiences, barriers, and supports while in the criminal justice program.

**Interview Analysis**

The analysis of the interviews will consist of multiple rounds of coding (Saldaña, 2021). During the first round of coding the qualitative data, I will use in vivo coding to document the interviewees’ own words to create codes (Saldaña, 2021). I will organize the codes from the second (third, fourth, etc.) pass into categories and subcodes (Saldaña, 2021). During the second round of coding, I will focus on synthesizing the experiences and cultural capital as described by the interviewees by looking at the in vivo codes and identifying which ones describe barriers rather than the ways they overcame barriers. During the third round of coding, I will look for what may cause or create those barriers (e.g., institutional policies, interpersonal relationships, racism, sexism, or intersections of racism and sexism). Throughout the fourth round of coding, I will look for ways the interviewees navigated barriers and what cultural capital they used to do so. During the fifth round of coding, I will collapse codes into themes that describe the ways the interviewees used cultural capital to overcome barriers. I will use Excel, NVivo software, and audio transcription software to assist with the organization, management, and translation of the collected data (Saldaña, 2021).

**Quality of the Research Study**

A qualitative study should provide the reader with enough descriptive detail to show that the conclusion makes sense (Merriam, 1998). The credibility of a study comes from gaining a deep understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the participants (Merriam, 1998).
Thus, to improve the quality of the research, I will use several strategies to address the trustworthiness and accuracy of the findings (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

First, I will engage in member checking to improve the accuracy of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once the coding and creation of themes is completed, I will conduct member checking by emailing the interviewee a summary of themes from my findings for her review (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Once the interviewee reviews the list of themes, she will be asked to respond via email with any feedback and additional thoughts. Based on feedback, I will complete the analysis process by making any requested changes or corrections. This process can reduce misrepresentation of the participants’ experiences by a researcher and will show the participants that their perspective was heard and understood (Merriam, 1998). Second, I will engage in memoing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During the interviews, if I find myself having a biased thought, I will document it and consider how it may affect the reliability and credibility of the data during my analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Third, I will use peer review. This will happen when my committee reviews my research and dissertation. Fourth, I will use rich, thick description of the interviewees’ unique cultural capital and how they utilized that cultural capital to help them overcome barriers they faced. Lastly, I will share my positionality in any published manuscripts or reports based on the findings.

**Self-Reflectivity Statement**

The matter I am attempting to learn more about is the experiences of WOC who selected criminal justice programs at rural community colleges, what barriers those students experienced, and how they overcame the barriers. My interest in this subject stems from teaching criminal justice at a rural community college and wanting to see students succeed. I am fascinated with
studying the experiences students had and examining the interaction between program and student. Having a detailed understanding of student experiences is very important for examining how a criminal justice program serves its students. The goal is to understand the experiences of WOC in a rural criminal justice program at a community college in the Midwest and the cultural capital they possess. I know that many students will have some issue or barrier during their college career and that when students are faced with barriers, they have to apply energy, time, and effort to overcome the barrier—which can take those resources away from their studies (Clement, 2016).

I have noticed in my own professional experience the difficulties that rural colleges and rural police departments have had with attracting qualified minority candidates to the law enforcement profession. I am familiar with the struggles and bias faced by many of these women in their pursuit of education and employment in the criminal justice field. I bring to this research decades of working in highly minority-populated neighborhoods and implementing programs that help minority citizens gain employment in the criminal justice field.

I do not know of any ethical issues with this research study. I am aware that almost all persons, including myself, have some sort of implicit bias that may affect the research process (Kang & Lane, 2010). I am conscious I have a personal connection to both the college and the criminal justice program. I have identified three issues of power and positionality I may face with this study. First, many of the students I interview will know me from being the coordinator of the Criminal Justice Department at the college and that I was a sergeant with a police department. Knowing my background could affect how the students answer questions, and they may withhold information. The second issue is that the students I interview may want to use me
as a professional reference in the future. This may deter them from answering questions honestly or offering negative feedback on the program or instructors, including myself. I will assure the interviewees that all information will be kept confidential and explain that how they answer the questions will not be associated with their identity. Lastly, my identity as a police officer, criminal justice instructor, and a White man will be bound to have an impact on my relationship with the participants and how they answer some of the questions.

I have been a police officer for over 27 years, and much of that time has been devoted to the training and development of new police officers. I have been a field training officer and the coordinator of a field training and evaluation program. I have a combined 25 years of experience in training police officers, and I have trained more than 20 full-time sworn law enforcement officers through the field training process. I was the tenured faculty member and coordinator of a criminal justice program at a rural community college for seven years, where I instructed hundreds of WOC. I was the dean over 14 career technical education programs, including criminal justice and other programs that were considered nontraditional studies for WOC. I am currently the executive director of campus operations and a member of the senior leadership team at a small, rural community college. I have previous experience counseling, advising, teaching, and mentoring WOC in a higher education setting.

I have worked in law enforcement shoulder to shoulder with several WOC. I have seen first-hand the successes, failures, positives, and barriers these women have faced, but as a White man, I do not know first-hand what it is like to be a woman of color in a law enforcement role. I, as a White man, need to be aware of power dynamics that come into play while interviewing a woman of color and the need to address these issues in conducting research (Limerick et al.,
1996). To overcome that challenge, I will use tested and proven methods to design my interview procedure in a way that will attempt to overcome the power imbalance between the interviewees and me as the researcher (Hesse-Biber, 2007). First, I will give the interviewees information about my personal background and history to create a more reciprocal experience (Esterberg, 2002). Second, I will allow the interviewees to view the themes (findings) of the research before they are used for analysis and give them an opportunity to submit input, corrections, or suggestions before the information gained from the interviews is used for public publication; this process is called member checking (DeCarlo, 2018). Third, I will make sure the interviewees are made aware of the intent of the research. I will share the rationale and need for this type of research (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Fourth, I will explain to the interviewees that their confidentiality will be protected and how that will be accomplished during the course of the research (Kaiser, 2009). Fifth, I will address the power dynamics by conducting the interviews at a neutral location (online) at a time of the interviewee’s choosing (R. Edwards & Holland, 2013). Lastly, I will conduct the interviews while demonstrating respect for the interviewees and attempting to develop rapport and a sense of connection with them by being a good listener (DeVault & Gross, 2012).

**Significance of the Study**

This research will inform my personal practice, lead to recommendations for criminal justice programs, and add to the current literature. This research strives to foster a better understanding of the transitions, experiences, barriers, and supports encountered by WOC while participating in a criminal justice program and how they may use cultural capital to overcome barriers (Denner & Werner, 2020). By doing so, this research may benefit community college
criminal justice programs and police departments by providing insights into more effective ways to support the education, training, and employment of WOC as police officers.

First, this study will contribute to the existing literature by providing insights into WOC’s transitions to and experiences in a criminal justice program at a rural community college. Little research in this area exists. Most literature on WOC and law enforcement is focused on criminality and not on the experiences of students in a criminal justice program (Wilson & Wilson, 2014). This study will add to the literature on WOC in law enforcement by focusing on experiences in a criminal justice program and highlighting the unique voices and contributions of WOC. This research, thus, also adds to studies on how WOC navigate barriers in community colleges, focusing on strategies and support networks that WOC tap into to manage transitions.

Second, this research will provide me with valuable insights that can inform my personal practice and teaching approaches as an instructor in the criminal justice program. I hope to gain insights into better ways to manage the diversity of learners in the classroom and how I can create a classroom community that is respectful of all student backgrounds and abilities. This research will provide me with an increased understanding of what barriers are faced by WOC in criminal justice programs and give me the opportunity to develop more appreciation of the process of transition that WOC experience (Anderson et al., 2022; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017; J. W. White et al., 2020). Reflecting on assignments, student learning outcomes, and how barriers affect students will allow me to identify ways to improve my teaching approaches. Lastly, I will have a better grasp of what support programs actually help students navigate their barriers, which will allow me to make more appropriate referrals to these support programs.
Third, this study may lead to recommendations for how criminal justice programs, in general, can support WOC. Based on insights into WOC’s experiences in a rural community college criminal justice program, this study will strive to identify ineffective environmental and pedagogical practices (Matos, 2021). Such information could inform the development of retention procedures in criminal justice programs (Matos, 2021). This research can also help colleges implement support programs for WOC, not only in criminal justice programs but in other areas, that would improve student experiences, satisfaction, and completion by identifying support needs from the interviewees’ experiences (Padgett et al., 2012).

Improving the retention of WOC in criminal justice programs is essential because law enforcement needs to have more WOC in their ranks, yet employment in the criminal justice field is not seen as desirable by many WOC (Rossler et al., 2019). There need to be better methods to recruit more WOC to work in criminal justice, especially as police officers. More WOC criminal justice graduates can mean more possible applicants, which can mean more WOC hired as police officers in the future (Walton et al., 2015). There are several reasons why it is important to increase the number of WOC who become police officers (Donohue, 2020). Having WOC represented in policing is not only an issue of equal employment opportunity, but it also embodies the gendered nature of serving the public (Donohue, 2021). Having a predominately and largely segregated workforce comprised of mostly men hampers the services provided by criminal justice agencies (Donohue, 2020; Zhao et al., 2001). This study will help fill some of the gaps in how to go about achieving a more diverse police force.
CHAPTER 2: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY EXAMINING WOMEN OF COLOR’S EXPERIENCES AS THEY PURSUE A CRIMINAL JUSTICE DEGREE

In the United States, law enforcement officers have traditionally been White men (Dukes, 2018). Law enforcement has come under scrutiny for the unbalanced ratio of White men to other minoritized groups in general and especially for the low percentage of women of color (WOC) who are police officers (Yu, 2018). While Blacks and Latina/o/x are underrepresented on the employment side of the criminal justice system, they are overrepresented on its incarceration side (Urbina & Alvarez, 2015). This imbalance has intensified calls for a more diverse police force because having criminal justice employees with a diverse background creates an environment conducive to garnering trust and engaging with the community, particularly communities with a larger minority population (Hough & Roberts, 2005; Todak et al., 2018).

The relationship between the police and communities of color continues to be strained (Roberts, 2022; Weitzer, 2015). Individuals who identify as people of color have faced racism, bias, and unfair treatment in the U.S. criminal justice system and thus have rightfully developed a distrust of law enforcement (Burgess-Proctor, 2006; Salinas, 2015). One reason for a lack of diversity among police officers may be negative attitudes held by communities of color toward the police (Bolton & Feagin, 2004; Lim & Lee, 2021). Race is a strong predictor of people’s attitude toward the police (Alberton & Gorey, 2018; Huang & Vaughn, 1996; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998). A person of color who wants to pursue a career in law
enforcement often is going against expectations based on previous experiences with the police (Donohue, 2020).

Men who are criminal justice majors may have unfavorable attitudes and not support women who are in that major (Austin & Hummer, 1994; Golden, 1981; Johns, 1979; Li et al., 2021). WOC are transitioning into a field in which most positions, especially positions of power, are held by White men (Dukes, 2018; Yu, 2018). WOC in criminal justice encounter barriers because of their race as well as their gender. These intersections of racism and sexism create unique barriers, such as being invisible and overlooked within the field of criminal justice (Eigenberg & Park, 2016).

This case study examined WOC’s experiences in a criminal justice program at a rural Midwest community college with the purpose of understanding the challenges WOC face in such a program and what they had to overcome to enter the program, persist, and complete it. It addressed the following research questions:

1. How do WOC experience transitioning to and being students in a criminal justice program at a rural community college?
   - How do WOC cope with transitions related to the criminal justice program?

2. How do WOC navigate barriers they encounter while transitioning to and pursuing a criminal justice degree at a rural community college?
   - What support networks do WOC tap into to navigate barriers?
   - What strategies do WOC use to navigate these barriers?
Literature Review

This study builds on literature on WOC’s underrepresentation in criminal justice and their experiences in community college and in criminal justice programs. By building on these topics, this study adds to literature about the pipeline for WOC to law enforcement. Little research exists that examines the experiences of WOC as they pursue a degree in law enforcement.

Reasons for Underrepresentation of WOC in Criminal Justice

Employment in the criminal justice field is currently not seen as desirable by many WOC (Rossler et al., 2019). Racial profiling and excessive use of force may discourage WOC from wanting to join the police profession (Clinkinbeard et al., 2021; Koper, 2004). Negative perceptions of the job and negative community reaction to high-profile use of force events may have discouraged WOC from pursuing a career in law enforcement (Campion & Esmail, 2016). Moreover, when minority students excel in education, they rarely see themselves aspiring to be a police officer or working in law enforcement. Rather, they seek employment in better paying and less dangerous professions (Hartman, 2015; Matthies et al., 2012).

Women police officers are still somewhat unknown to most people, especially in rural communities and non-metropolitan counties (Weitzer, 2015). Most people will not be exposed to a woman police officer, and that is part of why young WOC do not realize policing is a possible profession (Weitzer, 2015). The employment of women as police officers is further complicated by the occasional need to use force in the line of duty. In the past, using force was believed to require a lot of physical strength and an imposing stature, which women officers often do not possess (Cuadrado, 1995; Felkenes & Schroedel, 1993; Morash & Haarr, 1995; Salerno &
Sanchez, 2020). However, modern policing relies less on force and more on tactics and verbal skills that women are as good at as men—or maybe even better (Wright & Headley, 2020).

Living at the intersection of racism and sexism, WOC may also encounter unique barriers as they consider or pursue careers in law enforcement. The number of minority officers employed at a police department may influence the number of minority applicants who are successful in obtaining employment as a police officer (Todak & Brown, 2019; Warner et al., 1989; Zhao et al., 2001). Considering the low number of WOC in law enforcement, WOC may not believe they can obtain employment in the criminal justice field and thus may not apply to a criminal justice program (Kaste, 2014).

**Experiences of WOC in Community College**

Recent research indicates that social and academic integration are critical for first-year students of color (Karp et al., 2008). WOC need to engage both socially and academically to be successful in community college (Waters-Bailey et al., 2019). To improve experiences, retention, and degree completion, community colleges should have the following interventions available for WOC: mentoring programs, workshops on specific areas where WOC are underperforming peers, early warning systems, and support groups (Johnson, 2001).

WOC may encounter discrimination related to their gender, their race or ethnicity, and the intersection of those; this negatively affects their academics (Stevens et al., 2018). WOC report experiencing feelings of being unwanted and even rejected from student organizations and extracurricular activities because of race (Hannon et al., 2016; Simpson & Bista, 2021). WOC may experience many forms of bias and discrimination in education, including dress codes, adultification bias, disciplinary practices, test questions, and unconscious bias of teachers, but
many of these are not always easily recognized (Lang & Kahn-Lang Spitzer, 2020). Social and academic power structures also create barriers to student success, particularly for minoritized students such as WOC (Milner, 2010; Quaye et al., 2020). These barriers include lack of financial aid, no information on navigating the college process, bias, discrimination, lack of support from family or the college, a lack of mentors, and social issues including feeling isolated (Y. H. Kim, 2018; Loftin et al., 2012).

**Experiences of WOC in Criminal Justice Programs**

Having negative experiences in a criminal justice program may deter WOC from pursuing a career in law enforcement. While women are slightly overrepresented in college undergraduate studies overall, they are still a minority in criminal justice programs, which are dominated by men (Bystydzienski & Bird, 2006). The experiences of WOC in a college criminal justice program can encourage and support these women as they pursue a degree and a career in a man-dominated discipline (Helfgott et al., 2018). More needs to be known about WOC’s transition to and experiences in criminal justice programs.

Criminal justice programs at community colleges play an important role in preparing tomorrow’s criminal justice professionals (Price & Sokoloff, 2004). Just like in police departments, it is important to have a diverse student body within a community college criminal justice program (Bartee & Lomax, 2007; Cooke et al., 2019). The primary recruiting goal of community colleges and law enforcement organizations is to assemble a group of criminal justice professionals who closely resemble the population of the communities they serve (Shjarback et al., 2017). Simply having a diverse student body may, however, not be enough to attract WOC into criminal justice fields. While there is a statistical connection between the number of students
who pursue criminal justice degrees and number of people who seek employment in that field (Murray, 2017), this may not always be the case. Students of color—WOC, in particular—in criminal justice programs are more likely to pursue a career in a role other than police officer (Yim, 2009). Further, WOC who attend a criminal justice program are more likely than their men counterparts to pursue an advanced degree after attending a community college criminal justice program (Yim, 2003). Getting more WOC to transition into the field should be a concern for everyone, yet WOC still face many challenges in criminal justice programs, particularly at rural community colleges.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is guided by Schlossberg’s transition theory, which focuses on describing how individuals experience transitions to identify ways to help them have a positive transition (Anderson et al., 2022). A transition is an event or nonevent happening in a person’s life that causes changes in their beliefs about themselves and their situations (Anderson et al., 2022). A transition results in changed assumptions, routines, roles, and relationships. A transition only occurs if the person experiencing it considers it to be one (Goodman et al., 2006). Reactions to transition can change over time (Barclay, 2017; Goodman et al., 2006). The theory provided me a model I could use to consider aspects related to participants’ transitions. I used the theory to guide my questions for the interviews with the participants, and I focused on the four Ss of the theory to categorize their experiences.

Schlossberg theorized that adulthood is a time of change and growth characterized by transitions, crises, adaptation, coping, and stress (Anderson et al., 2022). Schlossberg identified four groups of factors that provide insights into the ways an individual may cope with a
transition (Evans et al., 2010). The factors of situation, self, support, and strategies (known as the four Ss) were used to ask questions about the situation in which the women in this study found themselves, the supports available to them, how their personal characteristics affected their experiences in the criminal justice program, how they viewed their lives, and how they handled barriers while in the program (Anderson et al., 2022). Each of the four Ss can be seen as an asset or liability to the participant.

Situation describes what precipitated or triggered the transition. Situation looks at how the transition came about and under what circumstance it is happening. Situation also considers the circumstances behind the participant’s decision to go into a transition. Situation looks to discover whether any trigger precipitated the transition as well as other details about the transition, such as timing, self-control, duration, and role change.

Self describes characteristics that can greatly influence how individuals perceive the transition process. The factors considered important in relation to the self are classified into two categories. The first category is personal and demographic characteristics that affect how an individual views life, such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, stage of life, state of health, and ethnicity. The second category is psychological resources, which include ego development, outlook, commitment, and values. Self looks to discover what the participant brings to the transition and how they manage it.

Support describes a person’s network of help. Support can come from any family member, a peer, a friend, or the institution. Support can be offered without being received or taken. It is important to understand whether the support is believed to be positive, negative, or
neutral by the person. Support can be financial, emotional, encouragement, or mentoring. It can also take other forms of emotional assistance.

Strategies explores aspects of coping with life problems. Strategies, or coping responses, are divided into three categories: those that modify the situation, those that control the meaning of the problem, and those that aid in managing stress in the aftermath (Barclay, 2017). Strategies create plans for dealing with a transition and focus on self-care and managing the stress in the aftermath.

The theory shaped the questions I asked the participants about their experiences and transitions. I asked questions related to each of the four Ss to help me better understand their experiences and transitions through that lens. The theory also guided the analysis of data. I focused on data related to support and strategies to understand ways to improve WOC’s transition experiences.

**Methodological Approach**

I approached this study through a constructivist worldview. Constructivism, as an epistemology, is the belief that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is acquired through a process of active construction in one’s mind (Fox, 2001). Constructivism stresses the importance of individual perspectives in answering the same questions (Schwandt, 2014). Constructivists tend to use qualitative methodologies to get an in-depth understanding of participants’ perspectives and meaning making (Given, 2008). I used a qualitative case study design (Merriam, 1998). In a case study, the reporting of the findings is very literal and uses deep, rich narratives to help the audience understand the issue, problem, or question. The propositions or questions about a phenomenon are articulated at the onset (Merriam 1998). A
single-case study is an analysis of a single unit; in this study that unit was the criminal justice program at the college (Given, 2008).

**Case Description**

The case is a criminal justice program at a rural community college in the Midwest. According to the college’s Office of Research and Grants, the total number of students in the criminal justice program over the last five years was 832, 26% of whom (218) were WOC. There were 401 women in the program, so 54% of them were WOC. The criminal justice program at the college had 86 graduates in the last five years, 23% of whom (20) were WOC. Thus, WOC had an 11% completion rate in the last five years, compared to 10% for all students.

**Participants and Participant Recruitment**

To select participants for this study, I utilized purposeful sampling with a specific set of inclusion criteria (L. Cohen et al., 2018). The criteria to be included in the study as a participant were: (a) the participant identified as being a woman, (b) the participant identified as non-White, and (c) the participant had taken four or more criminal justice courses at the college in the past five years. I recruited nine participants between the ages of 17 and 28 for this study from a list of previous students who fit the criteria for the study. The individuals who volunteered identified as either Black/African American, Latina, or two or more races (Black and Latina). I did not have participants of other non-White racial categories; thus, I limited the study to focus on the experiences of Black and Latina women. There were five Black or African American participants, three who were Latina, and one who identified as two or more races (Black and Latina). Most of the participants had already graduated at the time of the interview. Demographic
information was provided to me by the Office of Research at the college. See Table 4 for detailed information on the participants.

**Data Collection**

The primary data source was interviews with students from the criminal justice program at the college. A secondary source was documents from the college that provided contextual information. Prior to conducting the interviews, I collected and examined documents that contained data about college demographics and national benchmarks in areas such as enrollment, graduation rates, services offered, financial aid, and dollars awarded. The documents helped me understand the programs and efforts being made by the college to provide support to WOC students, as well as the historical use of the programs by WOC. The documents gave me insight into the issues and barriers students had faced in the past. Analysis of these documents allowed me to take a deeper look at the student support programs offered at the college. Having a good understanding of these programs allowed me to ask detailed follow-up questions during the interviews. These documents provided useful background and contextual information for the description of the case and the context of WOC’s experiences, barriers, and supports while in the criminal justice program.

I conducted two 30-45-minute semi-structured interviews with nine participants. The first interview topics focused on the participant’s transition into the criminal justice program, their experiences in the beginning of the program, and how their identity as a WOC shaped those experiences. The second interview focused on their experiences while in the program—barriers, challenges, and supports—along with follow-up and clarifying answers from the first interview.
With participant consent, I recorded the interviews and transcribed them using auto-transcription software to get a rough draft of the transcript, which I subsequently cleaned up.

**Table 4  Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Age During Interview Summer 2022</th>
<th>Age Began Program</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Graduation Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bev</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chanel</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maire</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TT</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Anticipated 2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronica</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Anticipated 2022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

I worked inductively to build patterns, categories, and themes by coding and organizing the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews. The data analysis consisted of multiple rounds of coding (Saldaña, 2021). During the first round of coding the qualitative data, I used a
program from Quirkos to perform coding, document the participants’ own words, and create broad codes (Saldaña, 2021). I then organized the codes from the second (third, fourth, etc.) pass into categories and subcodes (Saldaña, 2021). During the second round of coding, I focused on experiences, supports, and barriers as described by the interviewees. During the third round of coding, I looked for what may cause or create those barriers (e.g., institutional policies, interpersonal relationships, racism, sexism, or intersections of racism and sexism). Throughout the fourth round of coding, I looked for ways the interviewees navigated barriers and what methods they used to do so. During the fifth round of coding, I collapsed codes into themes that described the ways the interviewees were supported, encountered barriers, and how they overcame barriers. I used Excel, Quirkos software, and Otter.ai audio transcription software to assist with the organization, management, and translation of the collected data.

**Trustworthiness of the Research Study**

To improve the trustworthiness of the research, I used several strategies to address the accuracy of the findings (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). First, I engaged in member checking to improve the accuracy of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once the coding and creation of themes was completed, I conducted member checking by emailing the participant a summary of themes from my findings for her review (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Once the participant reviewed the list of themes, she was asked to respond via email with any feedback and additional thoughts. Based on that feedback, I completed the analysis process by making any relevant requested changes or corrections. This process can reduce misrepresentation of the participants’ experiences by a researcher and showed the participants that their perspective was heard and understood (Merriam, 1998). Second, I engaged in memoing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During
the interviews, when I found myself having a biased thought, I documented it and considered
how it may affect the reliability and credibility of the data during my analysis (Merriam &
Tisdell, 2016). Third, I used peer review when my committee reviewed my research and
dissertation. Lastly, I used rich, thick description of the participants’ experiences and how they
utilized supports to help them overcome barriers they faced.

Self-Reflectivity Statement

My positionality shaped my interest in and approach to this study. I have been a police
officer for over 29 years, and much of that time was devoted to the training and development of
new police officers. I have been a field training officer and the coordinator of a field training and
evaluation program. I have a combined 25 years of experience in training police officers. I was
the tenured faculty member and coordinator of a criminal justice program at a rural community
college for seven years, where I instructed hundreds of WOC. I was the dean over 14 career
technical education programs, including criminal justice and other programs that were
considered nontraditional studies for WOC. I had previously worked at the college, but at the
time of the interviews I was no longer working there.

Identifying as a White man, I do not know first-hand what it is like to be a WOC in a law
enforcement role. I, as a White man, needed to be aware of power dynamics that come into play
while interviewing WOC and the need to address these issues when conducting research
(Limerick et al., 1996). I identified three issues of power and positionality I faced with this study.
First, many of the participants I interviewed knew me from being the coordinator of the Criminal
Justice Department at the college and that I was a sergeant with a police department. Knowing
my background could affect how the participants answered questions or they may have withheld
information. The second issue I considered was that the participants I interviewed may want to use me as a professional reference in the future. This may have deterred them from answering questions honestly or offering negative feedback on the program or instructors, including myself. Lastly, my identity as a police officer, criminal justice instructor, and a White man were bound to have an impact on my relationship to the participants and how they answered some questions.

**Findings**

Four findings highlight the participants’ perceptions of their transition to and experiences in a criminal justice program as WOC at a rural community college. First, participants’ extended networks shared concerns about their decision to go into law enforcement but also tried to provide support. Second, participants’ transition to college was complicated by systems of oppression related to generation, socioeconomic, parental, and employment status. Third, participants felt like outsiders in their programs, so they looked for peer support from other WOC. Fourth, participants appreciated supportive faculty and resources provided by the institution but were often unaware of what the college offered.

**Concerns and Support of Family During Transition**

Participants’ extended networks shared concerns about their decision to go into law enforcement, particularly negative experiences with the police and concerns for participants’ safety, but they also tried to provide support. For example, Sam, who identified as biracial, received some support but also struggled with discouragement from family and friends. Sam shared, “My parents did encourage me, yes…. My friends showed a large amount of support and concern, and that was the best. Everybody started calling me and said they were proud of me, so that was cool.” Sam valued the support she received from those close to her as she started to
pursue a criminal justice degree, but she also received some discouragement from extended family. Sam explained:

I mean, for the most part, I think a lot of it was in you know, it was playful, and they were kidding, because of my background with my family. My [extended] family has had contact with the police from the criminal side. And I think you know at least a little bit about that and, you know, the lifestyle that I grew up in and the perception of law enforcement. I got made fun of a lot by my family and my close friends at first. I mean, once it got closer to graduation my parents actually became like, legitimately concerned for things like my safety, or that I may turn into a super cop, you know, and this bothered me.

Not having support from her extended family and some friends made going into the criminal justice program more difficult for Sam because the discouragement, whether teasing or not, bothered her. Sam was affected by her extended family’s negative perceptions of the police. Sam’s family became more concerned about her choice to pursue criminal justice after she completed the program. There was a mix of emotions from her family. On one hand they were worried about her safety, and on the other they worried the job would change their relationship.

Jane’s, a Latina, family also shared safety concerns related her identity as a WOC. Jane explained that her family showed concern before she even started in the program:

Not everyone was negative when I told them I was going into criminal justice, but I did hear comments that were discouraging…. My dad offered support but also wished I was doing something else the whole time. On one hand he is telling me to go for it, but on the other hand he wished I was going to do something else. He wasn't really in particular, of wanting me to do anything in regards to law enforcement, and not in a stance of like, he didn't like law enforcement, but he was just nothing. And it was something that he didn't believe that he just thought it would be too hard for someone who is a young woman going into that field, and he didn’t think I would be very successful doing it because I am a female, a woman of color, and just describing how it would be much harder for me to break into this profession that was obviously White male dominated. I think he was worried I may struggle with my counterparts in regards to fitting in or getting along with people or having some sort of difficulty being able to relate to each other in some way. For the most part, it didn’t discourage me to do it. It felt like it was more encouraging to want to be that link between the two. People aren’t very supportive of women of color
going into law enforcement versus the stereotypical person, a White male, who is in law enforcement.

Jane’s father seemed to have been torn between wanting to support his daughter and worrying about her choice to pursue law enforcement. Jane seemed to believe the discouragement she encountered was mainly connected to her identity as a WOC because law enforcement was a profession dominated by White men. Over time, Jane’s father came around to supporting her more. She said:

My dad, he’s very proud of me now. He encourages me to try new things more like if I wanted to, like move on in law enforcement, because obviously, I’m working in a small town now. He’s encouraged me to try and move up in the world from different departments, and so he’s a little more supportive these days.

At the time of the interview, Jane had been in law enforcement for almost three years. Her father seems to have accepted her career choice and, instead of discouraging her, started to encourage her to try to advance in her profession.

In yet another example of family having safety concerns, the participants faced negativity from their families when they announced they wanted to go to college for criminal justice and were told they should not do it. Mary, a Black woman, explained how her young child was concerned for her safety:

There was a lot of people who have fears for a woman being a police officer, that it’s like you won’t be able to be police officer and if you do you can end up getting shot. So, when I was wanting to go into criminal justice, I was talking to my son, he’s 8 now, and he was not happy about me trying to pursue anything get a criminal justice. He didn’t want me to be a police officer. He didn’t want to be a correctional officer. He had a fear that I will just go out there and do something that get hurt. Um, basically, all my sons it was like that they didn’t want to get that was a fear when we get shot. The fact that my boys care about me, it makes me feel like overwhelming good but the fact that if this was something that I was trying to go for in the beginning, and a person shouldn’t try to talk me out of it. It's kind of hurtful because you never know how far you could get. You would never know if I could have been good at it. I'll never know if I could have done it, if I would have quit.
Mary had mixed feelings about her sons’ concern for her. While she recognized that they worried about her because they cared, she wished they would support her career choice.

Sue, a Latina woman, was the only participant to receive support while going into the criminal justice program. She said she received positive support from her mother, whom she looks up to and trusts to provide her with encouragement. Sue talked to her mother often about the issues she faces as a WOC in the criminal justice field, and her mother provided her positive support. Sue said, “My mom has been a great support for me. My mom is…proud of me. I talked to her about everything that’s happening because I basically am on my own.” Sue used her mother as a sounding board for issues she was experiencing in the program.

**Difficulties with Transitions**

The participants faced several difficulties with transitions as they participated in the criminal justice program because the institution and program failed to address participants’ unique needs related to other nontraditional identities (e.g., first generation, low socioeconomic status, mother, employee). Chanel, a Black woman, spoke about being a first-generation college student and trying to learn how to navigate the college environment as she transitioned into the program:

> As a nontraditional, first-generation student, I think that you just don’t know a lot about the resources available until after your application like for college or to kind of go through the process and helped me with my job at the college because then you really get to know the different departments and the resources. I think me personally, having that worked at the college and having been a full-time student, I wouldn’t have known about the additional resources that were out there unless I went and found them.

Chanel highlighted how first-generation students do not always know how to navigate college resources, so she had to find them herself.
Sue was another first-generation student who had to find support services on her own as she transitioned into the program because she was not given or did not understand where to find the information on the available services offered by the college. Sue stated:

Since being a first-generation student, I feel like they expected me to take care of myself and knowing more of my own things. So that’s what made me challenge myself to do more research [on support service] and prove to them that I was that type of person who can figure things out on my own. But obviously being first generation can be really stressful because you as your own person is barely making it trying to look for yourself.

Sue and other participants said it was difficult to locate what support services were available and to maneuver through the process. Another support service participants discussed was financial aid and scholarships. Participants, like TT and Maire, said they needed some type of financial support in order to make it through the criminal justice program. TT said, “If I did not have financial aid, I would probably be dead,” and Marie stated:

Let’s just say the cost of college is very high for someone who does not come from means. I had to pay for books, supplies, and different additional things along with transportation costs to and from school multiple time a week. Financial aid was the only way I was able to attend college.

They felt it was important to be able to pay for college and for the college to identify resources like financial aid.

In addition to lacking knowledge about college and struggling to finance their education, participants said having time for school and time management were transitional challenges for them as they moved through the program. Mary said, “I was like 22 and I had kids. I had almost no time to go to school.” Mary had many responsibilities outside of school and several social identities that required her time and energy, which limited her time for school. Another participant, Chanel, also struggled to manage schoolwork and life outside of the classroom. She stated:
I didn’t have any time to even utilize, you know, other things and sometimes things falling in the same day as well. There was never enough time to get things done, and I was taking on too much with the classes and even more outside the classroom.

Chanel struggled to find enough time in the day for all her commitments because she led a busy life as a student and had a job with long hours. Chanel said, “Some days I had to choose between making money or doing homework.” She also mentioned being too busy for things like tutoring, friends, or networking with other students because of work or life responsibilities.

Jane was yet another participant who reported her biggest challenge was having time for school. She said:

I would say the only other challenges I really had was class scheduling. That was my biggest challenge because I was working full-time and I was trying to maintain my full-time job and going to college full time. I do know that I had quite a bit of challenges with time management. Classes were much different hours and what I could do, and I do know at one of the in-person classes had to turn into an online class for me, because I seem to recall that and that happens quite a bit. One of the other things noted is that working women and especially working mothers have difficulty if there aren’t a variety of class offerings to continue with the program.

Jane spoke about the several other identities she had—a mother and a full-time employee—and how those identities took up time and conflicted with her college schedule.

Bev had the same issue of feeling she did not have enough time to get schoolwork and personal things done. Bev said:

I guess meeting deadlines was always hard for me only because, you know, I was a little bit older going to school versus the ones right out of high school and I had kids, so that was always a little bit challenge for me.

Bev had many other social identities and responsibilities that took time to perform and manage. Bev thought younger students had more time for school than older students with children. Not knowing how to navigate the college environment, needing financial assistance to pay for college, and not having enough time to successfully complete college while working are just a
few examples. These difficulties, or barriers, were often linked to the participants’ other identities (first generation, low socioeconomic status, mother, employee) and complicated their transition to college.

**Being One of Only a Few WOC in the Program**

Many participants felt like outsiders in a criminal justice program populated by White men. Marie, a Black woman, said she felt like an outsider because of “certain biases that people have about women of color.” Marie further stated:

> There are challenges with people that don’t look like me and who don’t understand where I have been. The mere fact that you don’t see many, there’s a very, very small percentage of women of color in policing period, right. And so to find Black women, minority women in those type of classes, is rare. And so yes, people want to know why you there not just want to know they literally asked you know, what made you decide to take on criminal justice? Because they know that our culture isn’t. We’re not. We’re typically and they think, you know, the stereotype is they believe we're typically antipolice.

This statement from Marie highlights the importance of recognizing negative stereotypes and how antipolice culture can be an issue for WOC in a criminal justice program. Marie said WOC were rare in criminal justice programs and in policing.

Jane was also faced with stereotypes about being a WOC in a criminal justice program. She said, “Most of my conversations [with family] pertained to the fact that I am a female, a woman of color and just describing how it would be much harder for me to break into this profession, that was obviously White male dominance.” Jane further said:

> As a woman of color, I would say yes, I definitely did feel that I felt like I had to prove myself in some ways where I needed to be more involved and be more involved with the class, more outspoken doing well in my grades because if I if I didn’t do well, then they were already making that assumption that I wasn’t taking anything seriously. So, everything had to be done well. I had to make sure that I was in a way, standing out in order to be taken seriously as somebody who’s doing the mediocre amount of work. Okay, well, I’m going to keep going. Because I was told that I couldn’t, or you told me that I shouldn’t, and now I want to do it to even more.
Being in a program that did not have many other students who looked like her, Jane felt she had to do more to overcome assumptions about her as a WOC in a criminal justice program. Jane tried to turn the negative comments into a positive by becoming more driven to succeed.

The participants described in their stories how they had been part of conversations that were stereotypical in connotation about being a woman, particularly a WOC, in the criminal justice program and how WOC are rare in the program. For example, Sam said, “White people have a preconceived notion about anything that color people do, and it goes back again to stereotypes.” Sam further stated, “Because it is not the norm, it is not normal for women of color to go into law enforcement.” Sam’s comment highlighted the experience of what it was like to be a WOC in a program where there are few other WOC. The participants repeatedly described these comments and conversations as “discouraging.”

The participants said they had experienced situations when they were not treated as equals in the program by their peers. Sue spoke about having to overcome preconceived ideas from other students in the criminal justice program who did not look like her:

During my first year in the program, I was the only one being colored so like it did change the atmosphere, it was really different. I feel like people think that some of us don’t know what we’re doing, I felt like an outsider in a criminal justice program that was full of White people, unlike high school when there was more diversity in my classes.

Sue described being one of only a few WOC who was in a class with little diversity and indicated the class did not provide an inviting atmosphere, thus making her feel unwelcome.

Some participants felt there was a lack of social networking opportunities on campus for WOC. This may be because there were few WOC on campus in the criminal justice program. TT stated, “I tried to find a club or student organization to join, but there weren’t any that had
anything to do with criminal justice and they all were for the guys.” Many participants felt having a group for social interaction among just WOC would have been very beneficial for them. Sue said, “The reason I asked [the program] for [a group] outside of the classroom is because during the classroom you’re there to learn, not really socialize, so it’s difficult to build those relationships.” The program was not able to form a group while Sue was at the college. Sue and other participants thought peer support would be valuable, and they would have been interested in participating in student groups or clubs that increased their ability to network with other WOC, especially those in the criminal justice program, to overcome barriers. Veronica, a Latina woman, also spoke about connecting with other WOC when facing a challenge or barrier. She said:

> It is a bit different for women of color to go through the process [in the criminal justice program] because I feel like as a woman of color, there are a lot of challenges and roadblocks that we have compared to others, we had to rely on each other.

Participants tried to network with other WOC as they strove to cope with barriers other WOC may have also experienced.

**Faculty Support and College Resources**

Support services programs such as TRIO and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) grants were also highly touted by participants. Bev said, “I used WIOA, and I was able to get my books for free through their support services.” Bev added:

> My instructor, I think he was there after you. He was very passionate about his job. He was telling us how he used to work there. He always stayed on us to make sure we get our stuff done. He always made sure we understood it and we can come for help. So, when I started working hard for it, he always chimed in like, “I think you would make a good officer,” and I think he encouraged me. When he would say that, that gave encouragement for you to keep going you felt like it was a potential thing.
Bev talked about how having an attentive faculty member supported her and gave her encouragement, which made her feel she could succeed.

Jane also had a supportive faculty member who made an impression on her. She said:

I will say the teachers were very supportive. I know I had many of the professors and teachers who were very supportive of me being a woman of color interested in the field and I will say that was a big part of my success was knowing I had that support and someone else believed I could do the job.

Jane thought having someone believe in her was part of her success. Chanel added her thoughts on having staff support and how that made her believe in herself:

I had my Counselor D. She was very, very helpful. Even with the classes, picking out the classes, making sure that I was picking out the right classes, and that I was going to the classes and showing up on time. So, she was a big support, big help, and honestly, I want to say the teacher as well as he really like supportive and made me believe in myself.

Chanel had both a supportive counselor and faculty member. Many participants had a positive experience with faculty and that helped them get through the program.

Sue said she was a first-generation college student, and it helped to have a support system of peers and teachers to navigate the college. Sue added:

They just don’t they just want to know what’s your goal, what’s your career, what do you want to do with your life and like what you need help with, and they give you that and then it’s just a biggest support system. I had the support from my instructor. He was able to kind of help, advise, and walk me through things.

Sue had a positive experience with faculty giving her advice and acting almost like mentors to help her navigate the college environment.

Veronica stated that as a nontraditional student she did not think much about resources until she had to fill out an application or go through a process at the college. She described having a positive experience with both support services and faculty. She said:
Well, for me personally, I had the support from my criminal justice instructor. He was able to kind of help, advise, and walk me through things. I mean, my other instructors were phenomenal and the retention and, you know, keeping us focused and just giving us that encouragement that yeah, you know, we are making the right decision. I also ended up being a part of TRIO, which I think that that kind of helped as well. Because I think that that really helped me stay where I needed to focus and just kind of those check ins that okay, you know what I got let’s close this stuff and have everything like mapped out ahead. I think initially in the beginning, I didn’t use much of any resources. But later on, when I was in TRIO, I learned about more resources. As a nontraditional student, I think that you just don’t know a lot about the resources until after you apply like collage or to kind of go through the process and apply for financial aid at the college because then you really get to know the different departments and the resources. I think for me personally, having had been a full-time student, I wouldn’t have known about the additional resources that were out there unless I asked.

Clearly, support services, faculty, and staff at the college provided support to Veronica. The college had several programs that had a positive impact on the participants’ college experience. Veronica had issues with the college not presenting resources to her; she had to find them herself until she was in TRIO.

Discussion

This study highlighted how WOC transition into a criminal justice program and described their experiences in it through four themes. The first theme is that the participants heard concerns and support from family during the transition. This study shows the influence of friends and family who provide support for WOC as they transition into a criminal justice program and how lacking that support can deter people from this career. The second theme is that the participants had difficulties with transitions as intersecting systems of oppression complicated participants’ transition to college as they held additional marginalized identities (e.g., first generation, low socioeconomic status, mother, employee). The institution and program failing to address participants’ unique needs related to other nontraditional intersecting identities (e.g., first generation, low socioeconomic status, mother, employee) often created barriers. These barriers
can be lessened or overcome by participants using resources provided by the institution and having a mentor or supportive faculty. The third theme is being one of only a few WOC in the criminal justice program. Having a peer group would be helpful in coping with transition. WOC were looking for support specifically from other WOC in the criminal justice program. This emphasizes the importance of recruiting a diverse group of students for programs; in the meantime, institutions need to figure out how to connect the few WOC in their programs so they can have support. The last theme centers on faculty support and college resources. The participants often referred to the importance of the support and guidance they received from faculty and staff to overcome barriers and deal with issues while coping with transition.

This study contributes to the literature by in some cases supporting and in other cases expanding upon research related to Schlosberg’s transition theory and builds on the literature about the experiences of WOC in criminal justice programs at community colleges (Watt, 2006). The participants’ experiences during transition were connected to the four Ss of self, situation, support, and strategies. Using the four Ss allowed me to focus on the factors that influenced the participants’ ability to cope with transition (Evans et al., 1998).

The participants’ other identities (first generation, low socioeconomic status, mother, employee) impacted their transition to college and their experiences in the criminal justice program. The participants discussed being first-generation students and having no experience with applying to college, registering for courses, and paying for college. This is in line with what Kuh et al. (2006) and Winkle-Wagner and Locks (2020) noted: barriers the participants often encountered when they entered college made it difficult for them to use their school’s resources for learning and personal development. The participants discussed how their identity as a mother
affected their transitions through comments from children and the time required to parent and care for their children. Some participants were several years out of high school, and the identity of being an older, nontraditional student affected relationships and their transitions. The participants’ other identities were similar to what Schlossberg discussed, i.e., socioeconomic status, stage of life, ethnicity, and being a parent can affect an individual’s view on life and transitions (Anderson et al., 2022). The participants coped with the transitions they faced by familiarizing themselves with the process of college, learning what resources were available to them, and communicating with other WOC to learn best practices in success.

As discussed, participants among very few WOC in their program, which created unique challenges and a lack of support. This supports previous literature about why few WOC are in criminal justice roles. The lack of support is understandable when the country has seen a racial reckoning and protests in the past few years that focused on police brutality and the murder of Black men and women by police (Waldron, 2020). This context may have shaped the negative attitudes WOC encountered, or at a minimum is a factor in the number of WOC who see criminal justice as a possible profession.

The situation in Schlossberg’s theory is really about the situation specific to each individual; however, since this study looked at commonalities across participants, this discussion covers situational aspects that applied to several or most of the participants. The participants faced several issues in the program, including gendered and racial bias and attitudes, that made them feel they were not fitting in with their peers. This mirrors Yu (2018) and Helfgott et al. (2018), who found that women entering a field in which most positions, particularly positions of power, are held by men face gender discrimination and must overcome men’s notion that women
are less capable of performing police work. The participants’ feeling like an outsider was linked to the men in the criminal justice program showing unfavorable attitudes and not supporting the women, which is comparable to the findings of Austin and Hummer (1994), Golden (1981), Johns (1979), and Li et al. (2021). The participants felt they were outsiders because they were among only a few WOC in the program, and they faced discrimination from White men students, such as negative comments and attitudes. Thus, the participants used looking for peer support and relying on other WOC as a coping method because, as they stated, only other WOC would be able to understand and know what they have been through. This is just another way the WOC navigated the transition through the program. The intersectionality of gender and race were overlapping factors that led to the participants being oppressed in the program.

The participants’ decision to go into the criminal justice program was often done even while hearing concerns about their choice. Hearing these concerns negatively affected participants by causing them to doubt themselves, feel unsupported, lack confidence, and wonder whether they could actually complete the program. This finding demonstrates the importance of the positive support that WOC need to hear and feel to know they are accepted and respected in their choice to pursue the program. Support may be used for coping with barriers the participants encounter.

The participants appreciated the support of faculty and resources the institution provided but were often unaware of what the college offered. Schlossberg stated that support can come from an institution (the college) and from a person (faculty and staff) and is vital for completing transitions (Anderson et al., 2022). She also said support can be in the form of mentoring (like tutoring) and financial assistance (like financial aid). J. Kim et al. (2021) and Kuh (2009) found
that a student’s inability to use resources can influence their decision to stay or leave an institution. As found in Milner (2010) and Quaye et al. (2020), social and academic power structures create barriers to student success, particularly for minoritized students such as WOC. If colleges are to maintain the number of WOC in criminal justice programs, they will need to improve the support they provide to this population.

The few opportunities for students to engage with identity-based groups and generate a sense of community affected the extent to which WOC engaged with each other and with on-campus resources, as also found by Ivory (2012). Analogous to research by Hannon et al. (2016) and Simpson and Bista (2021), this study found that WOC report experiencing the need to have a social or support group for WOC while in college. Participants reported there were not enough WOC criminal justice students to form support groups and said they felt like outsiders because of their race and gender. This finding mirrors Bartee and Lomax (2007) and Cooke et al. (2019) on the importance of having a diverse program so students can communicate with others with similar backgrounds and experiences.

Strategies are plans to use institutional resources and other tools used by participants to overcome certain barriers. One such strategy was attempting to create a support network of WOC to communicate about similar issues they share, such as their need to pay for college and childcare. The participants coped with those issues by applying for financial aid, scholarships, and book loan programs. The participants described the issue of having to use time management strategies to work full time and still have time to study. They were able to cope by selecting classes that fit their schedules and offered hybrid and online options. The participants also had to
develop strategies to manage their other identities (e.g., being a mother) and schoolwork. They were able to cope by using the free childcare to attend class and tutoring sessions.

**Implications for Professional Practice**

This study has implications for college administrators and instructors and for criminal justice professionals. Colleges can enact recruitment programs that focus on providing support to students, educating faculty about issues that affect WOC in programs dominated by men, and understanding the challenges faced by WOC in criminal justice programs. These recruitment programs could focus on gaining the support of families by providing facts and information about the program. This may support WOC as they cope with transition into the program. Colleges would benefit from expanding recruitment, focusing on educating not only the prospective student but also their support network, and locating and recruiting WOC who want to help others as a career. One path to recruiting should be marketing a criminal justice program that de-emphasizes the stereotypical “White man running and gunning” type of policing and focuses more on creating meaningful relationships with a diverse community. Yet another path to recruitment could be focusing on college students who are majoring in more traditional helping fields (e.g., sociology, psychology, social work, and early childhood). Recruitment strategies should appeal to those desires to influence the narrative around policing, improve things for future generations, and prove it is not a career restricted to White men.

This study also has implications for college instructors, who should be especially aware of the classroom dynamics that can occur and how to create an environment of inclusiveness and belonging. Colleges should work with faculty to improve personal practice and teaching approaches in criminal justice programs by providing an increased understanding of what
barriers are faced by WOC in criminal justice programs and an opportunity to develop a greater appreciation of the transition process WOC experience. Faculty should be given the results to any surveys to help them monitor the needs of their students. College administrators and professionals need to be aware of a student’s individual identities and understand how these can complicate their transition into college. College administrators should also work to have a diverse student body. Colleges need to provide a support network for WOC students and opportunities to network with peers outside of the classroom so they do not feel like outsiders. These opportunities could be in the form of student organizations for WOC in criminal justice or career technologies programs. The college could also form Microsoft Teams for WOC to communicate or have a group email they could opt into receiving. These support networks can help students cope with transition while in the program, and the college should aim to provide the mentoring and supports needed to overcome barriers that hinder the educational opportunities in the criminal justice program. The college should implement programs, such as student organizations and clubs, specifically for WOC to communicate and network with each other. The college should call for improvements in the way support programs are presented to students, especially those programs identified in this study as being impactful for WOC.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study adds to the limited literature on WOC’s experiences in criminal justice programs and highlights the importance of external networks and their influence on WOC’s transition experiences. Future research should dig deeper into the relationship of WOC with their extended family networks and how those shape their experiences in criminal justice programs.
There is little research on the effects of extended networks sharing their concerns about students going into a specific college program.

Future research should expand understanding of WOC’s experiences in multiple locations to gain further insights on experiences within different types of criminal justice programs. An example would be looking at an urban setting versus a rural setting or examining a program where there are more WOC in the program like at a HBCU. Future research should also focus on helping first-generation WOC overcome difficulties with transitions through time management education, faculty support, and college resources.

**Conclusion**

This study found that the WOC participants felt their families expressed concerns and offered varying degrees of support during their transition into a criminal justice program. Once on campus, they faced challenges because there were only a few WOC in the program. Further, the participants discussed experiencing difficulties with transitions and having to find ways to cope with time management issues, having multiple social identities, and first-generation college student issues. Lastly, participants found faculty support and college resources helpful during their transitions to and in college.

This study indicates that community college criminal justice programs should strive to foster a better understanding of the transitions experienced by WOC and provide better support to them while they cope with transitions. Community colleges should attempt to minimize barriers faced by WOC while participating in criminal justice programs and provide them information about how to use supports to overcome barriers. This research may benefit community college criminal justice programs by providing insights into more effective ways to
recruit WOC to the programs and then improve their educational experiences by providing them with the supports and resources they need once they are in them. Support during transitions is valuable and will help WOC cope with barriers and issues faced in transition.
CHAPTER 3: A SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

In this chapter, I provide a reflection on the dissertation process that examines my reasons for conducting this study along with how it changed from my original purpose to the final outcome. I explain what went well during the process as well as what did not go well. Further, I describe what changes I might make if I went through this process again. I discuss how conducting this study made an impact on my professional practice as an administrator in higher education and how this study could bring about changes at my institution. Lastly, I summarize my experiences along the journey of writing this dissertation and what this may bring to my future.

Reflection on the Dissertation Process

I have been involved in law enforcement and criminal justice for over 30 years through my career as a police officer and in higher education. I have been a college instructor of criminal justice for over a decade. During my time as a police officer and an instructor, I noticed that something was not working to bring WOC to the classroom and the profession. I wanted to do something about this issue through my work.

I originally aimed to learn more about why WOC are not transitioning into criminal justice positions at a rate equal to their proportion of the population, especially in rural communities. The low rate of WOC graduating with degrees in criminal justice, along with the even lower rate of transitioning into law enforcement positions, had not been recently researched at either the college or the employment level. Over several weeks of discussions, this idea
evolved into looking at the cultural capital that WOC bring to criminal justice programs. That study would have looked into how WOC can use their cultural capital to successfully complete criminal justice programs at rural community colleges. My thought was this type of data could be used to create programs to increase the number of WOC in college criminal justice and law enforcement. I really wanted to gain information that would help with the recruitment, retention, and success of WOC in college criminal justice programs and could then be used to do the same with employment in law enforcement. This was determined to be too big a topic for my research. I was trying to answer too many questions. I needed to narrow my topic to something that was more manageable, more reasonable to complete. When I began writing my study, I had a broad topic, and my research questions were also too far reaching to complete a study that would add to the literature. The original topic was also going to be difficult to align with a research theory because it was not focused. The process to narrow the topic to one that was manageable and workable was done by communicating with my chair about my goals for the research and what topic would cleanly and succinctly bring focus to the research.

As I worked with my chair to narrow the topic, questions, and focus of my dissertation, I realized cultural capital theory did not fit the research question I wanted to answer. During my proposal defense, my committee suggested I look at using Schlossberg’s transition theory. After researching that theory, I thought it would work with my topic and the research questions I wanted to examine. I found that Schlossberg’s transition theory included several nuances that would work well with the now narrower focus of my study and would give the study a framework for examining the research questions thoroughly. I decided to use Schlossberg’s transition theory to examine the experiences WOC had while transitioning into and through the
program. The context and impact of the transitions would be part of the data gathered in interviews with participants, which was what I was looking for. Ultimately, the study was revised to learn more about the transitions experienced by WOC who participated in a criminal justice program at a rural community college. My research ended up looking at transitions and experiences because the data could be used to improve programs and increase successful completions and because there was theory and previous research I could use in the study. This was the right approach for this study, and the theoretical framework worked well for examining the research questions through rich and descriptive interviews.

There is a clear winner for what went well: the actual amount of information gained in the interviews. I thought the interviews were the best part of this process. The data gathering itself was very rewarding and doing two interviews versus one was also a very good decision. By doing multiple interviews, I was able to establish rapport with the participants and, during the second round of interviews, add follow-up and clarifying questions from data gathered in the first round of interviews. The process of having multiple interviews allowed me to gather more detailed data in the interviews and allowed the participants to think about the subject of the study between interviews. I would add a third round of interviews if I were to do the data-gathering process again. I would do the third round of interviews once I had time to really absorb and process the data gathered from the first two interviews. It would have been nice to have been able to touch base for a short third interview for clarification, especially to address information that was gathered in other participant interviews.

There was also a winner for what did not go well: the participants actually showing up for the interview during the time slot they reserved. If I were to do the study again, I would want to
incentivize the interview participation process. I do not think this would have altered the interviews in any way, other than that the participants would have been a little more motivated to be involved in the study and they may have been better about making their scheduled appointments. By not providing an incentive for the interview, I was really at the participants’ mercy for showing up to a scheduled interview appointment. Of the 18 interviews, only six occurred on the first scheduled appointment, six on the second, and the final six each took more than three bookings to complete. I think having a $20 gift card to a coffee shop would have been enough to get participants to make their appointments more often.

Another observation is that once a participant missed an interview, they seemed hesitant to reschedule until I reached out and assured them that it was no big deal that they missed their scheduled appointment and that they could reschedule the interview at any time that worked for them. It was almost as if they thought they were in some kind of trouble for missing the interview. I wondered whether this was because of the dynamic of me being a White man, a previous criminal justice instructor, and now an administrator at the college. Could this have been because of my positionality? This would also be an area I would address differently if I were to do another research study. I would clearly outline how to reschedule an interview and explain to the participants that it is understood that things come up and stuff happens. Rescheduling interviews is not unusual or frowned upon; the most important thing is hearing the unique and personal stories. This observation may be related to the finding about how the participants’ other identities complicated their transitions. All participants lived busy lives and had time management issues with their college work. I could completely understand how participating in my research study would fall low on a priority list.
If I were to do this again, another thing I would consider would be doing a mixed-methods study. It would be interesting to analyze how things like high school versus college grades, attendance, use of tutoring, participation in athletics, and other data such as time spent studying and type of course taken (in person, hybrid, online) affected the barriers identified. I like the idea of using both quantitative methods and qualitative stories as well as peer review to triangulate the research outcomes. Quantitative data can be used to present measurable inputs and outcomes. Qualitative stories can give the deep description and details of the questions being asked. Mixed-methods research provides the benefit of providing both the contextualized details that qualitative research can provide and the valid insights of quantitative data. The two types of study can complement each other, and their findings can be mixed prior to interpreting the data.

I think this type of research could be useful for educating higher education professionals about how to help WOC have an enjoyable college experience in which they feel they belong in their chosen program. This type of research can increase the completion and success rate of WOC in their college pursuits. Further, this type of research may help colleges create plans and policies to improve programs that serve students. This type of research can add actual solutions to real problems WOC face. I learned more than I ever thought I would about the participants, and that is what I cherish the most. I have no regrets about how this research went.

Applications to Professional Practice

I would apply what I learned from this study in my professional practice by addressing the four key findings from the research study. The first finding was that the participants’ extended networks shared concerns about their decision to go into law enforcement, particularly negative experiences with the police and concerns for participants’ safety, but they also tried to
provide support. The participants relied heavily on their external support networks (i.e., family and friends) but also faced some discouragement from individuals in those networks. In my professional practice as an administrator, I would want to work with marketing and student recruitment to develop a plan of action that would not only seek students who are interested in criminal justice but also find ways to educate and support parents and family members of students who are going into the program. I would advise the college to hold informational sessions to inform external support networks what it will be like for someone to go through the criminal justice program and what supports they may need to provide the student.

The second finding was that intersecting systems of oppression complicated participants’ transition to college as they held additional marginalized identities (e.g., first generation, low socioeconomic status, mother, employee). As an administrator, I believe the college needs to provide WOC access to support programs and services such as TRIO Student Support Services, scholarships, and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act grants. I would also seek to provide first-year WOC criminal justice students with time management educational materials and create a universal syllabus that would provide resource information in the palm of their hands at the beginning of every class.

The third finding was that being among only a few WOC in the program caused the participants to feel like outsiders in their programs so they looked for peer support from other WOC. As an administrator, I would want to see the college develop student groups and programs to support WOC on their journey into and through the criminal justice programs. Having a student group just for WOC to meet and share their stories and experiences would be very beneficial. The college would also need to develop a policy or program to increase the number of
WOC students in each cohort and class, not only to increase diversity but also to allow students’ voices and perspectives to be heard. Further, the college should take specific steps to welcome WOC to the college and program. It is amazing how far a kind word, an email, or even a welcome bag can go to changing a student’s outlook. The college should have open dialogue sessions and conduct student satisfaction surveys with questions that directly apply to this issue. The college should not only make changes but follow up to make sure the changes are working and creating the environment they were meant to.

The fourth finding was that the participants appreciated supportive faculty and resources provided by the institution but were often unaware of what the college offered. As an administrator, I would tackle this in two parts. First, I would work with faculty and staff to provide training and feedback to increase the support offered to students. I truly believe when faculty and staff know what the students need to be successful, they will provide it. Second, I would make sure the college provides information to WOC that is specifically for WOC--the information they need in order to access services that can help them succeed in their college career.

This dissertation research really opened my eyes to even more issues involving Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) students and their journey through higher education and life. After each interview, I had more questions than answers, and that increased my motivation to do research. It seemed to me there was an overwhelming amount of research and work that should be done to help colleges function better and serve their students, especially WOC students, better. Conducting the interviews made me think there are best practices that
should be used at the college and that serving BIPOC students should be a larger part of accreditation.

I will use what I have learned through this process to create a more inclusive classroom atmosphere for all students by providing WOC students with the resources and information they need to successfully navigate the college environment. I believe having information provided in all syllabi about resources available and a link to the online resources will be a big improvement to the current system. I will be an advocate for the concerns and barriers voiced by my participants. I will work toward implementing the solutions outlined in this section to improve the transitional experiences of WOC students by sharing my data in meetings, not only with the criminal justice department but with other departments and the senior leadership team at the college. I hope to create a more inclusive atmosphere for WOC in the criminal justice program and provide WOC students with a sense of support and belonging. The ultimate goal is to provide a college environment that is conducive to the success of WOC in the criminal justice program.

Applications to Research

The key to my research process was to keep in mind that the study I was doing mattered and that I had to have patience. I believed in the process to complete the work and that if I kept continually working to make the research better, it would be. I kept an open mind about all aspects of the process and thus had my eyes opened to the issues and concerns faced by WOC trying to pursue education in the criminal justice field. I also have a new respect and appreciation for researchers and those who write these kinds of studies for publication. To be able to publish several articles in a year is a truly amazing feat. The plethora of different topics, theoretical
frameworks, and methodologies create an endless number of possible studies. I hope my small contribution will do good for many and actually make a contribution to the literature.

I would like to do more research in the future. I like the idea of doing a mixed-methods study. I have now completed both a quantitative and qualitative study. I learned much from completing both types of research but feel, if done correctly, that having the numbers from quantitative supported by the deep, rich descriptions of qualitative would be best for my future research. I also believe had it not been for my curiosity and my internal motivations to do good with my research, I would not have been able to complete my studies and further my education. My journey is a story for other community college students to learn from. It is not how or where you begin, but where you end that matters. I am a kid who went to community college because he did not know what he wanted to do with his life. The coursework leading up to writing this dissertation was both practical and informative. I became a better administrator and instructor. The faculty who worked with me on my study were second to none, and their encouragement, patience, and teaching gave me the confidence to complete the research and dissertation.

In writing an article to publish in a journal, I thought about how this research would work well for publications that are engaged with student recruitment and retention as well as criminal justice publications. I was given information from my chair about possible journals to publish in along with online journal finders. I discovered that research ethics calls for submitting to only one journal at a time. I also learned that different publications have different requirements for formatting and writing style. One formatting requirement I took into consideration was the word limit that is required by many journals. I saw one journal was limited to only 4,000 words, and I know I am way too long winded to cut my data down that much. I think too much would be lost
by cutting down to that low of a word count. I was able to locate other publications that I thought would be a good fit for my research. Many of these did not have a word count requirement or had a much larger word count requirement in their submission guidelines, but that does not necessarily mean they do not have a limit on the length of articles.

I was interested in finding a journal to publish in that offered articles on the theory associated with transition and retention work on college campuses and on contemporary issues affecting transitions and retention on college campuses. The main audience for this research would be college instructors, recruiters, and college administrators. The secondary audience of law enforcement recruiters and administrators would not typically look to the same journal for input on recruiting and retention information. I learned that the publication process is not simple. Navigating the peer review process can be tricky and difficult. In conclusion, I learned that to get my research published, I need to choose a publication whose goals and subject area fit my research and that has a suitable audience. I also need to find a journal in which my research could be published without a large reduction of words and tables based on the submission guidelines. Finally, I will need to be sure to follow all the other submission guidelines and requirements for peer review.

**Conclusion**

In the end, my dissertation is the greatest achievement on my educational journey so far. I developed a personal connection with all the participants, and I truly enjoyed not only the interviews but also studying the literature to review. I look forward to applying what I learned from the study to help WOC succeed in criminal justice programs. First, participants’ extended networks shared concerns about their decision to go into law enforcement but also tried to
provide support. Second, participants felt like outsiders in their programs, so they looked for peer support from other WOC.

The first finding was that the participants’ extended networks shared concerns about their decision to go into law enforcement, particularly negative experiences with the police and concerns for participants’ safety, but they also tried to provide support. The participants relied heavily on their external support networks (i.e., family and friends) but also faced some discouragement from individuals in these networks. WOC need to feel they are making the decision to go into the criminal justice program with some support and that they have access to a support network if they need to use it. I believe this is in part because they are going onto a program that is dominated by White men. WOC live busy lives and finding time for school is made difficult by their other identities.

The second finding was that the participants faced several difficulties with transition as they participated in the criminal justice program because of intersecting identities. The participants’ other identities (first generation, low socioeconomic status, mother, employee) complicated their transitions during college. As a result of that finding, I believe WOC need access to support programs and services (TRIO Student Support Services) that offer things such as free books, childcare, mileage reimbursement, and transportation to class. These support services help ease the burden of the cost of college, which can free up time from work that can be used to fill the demands of college.

The third finding was that participants felt like outsiders in their programs, so they looked for peer support from other WOC. I believe this is for many reasons, but one of the ones most acknowledged by participants was that WOC understand each other and the issues they face.
They have a respect for what they all have gone through that cannot be duplicated by persons outside their inner circle.

Lastly, the importance of what faculty and staff do to support WOC cannot be forgotten. The fourth finding was that the participants appreciated supportive faculty and resources provided by the institution but were often unaware of what the college offered. Support from faculty and staff help WOC feel they can accomplish their goals. WOC need to be given clear guidance on how to access and navigate the college system, including financial aid, enrollment services, and guided pathways. Many of the transition issues faced by WOC can be addressed by faculty and staff who take the time to get to know their WOC students better and be sensitive to the needs of WOC in criminal justice programs.
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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT LETTER
Attention: Criminal justice students and CRJ graduates

I am conducting interviews as part of a research study for my doctoral program at NIU to increase my understanding of how women of color criminal justice students experienced their participation in that program. You are in an ideal position to provide valuable first-hand information from your experiences. I am looking for students who meet the following criteria:

- Current criminal justice student or previous criminal justice student
- Between the ages of 18–35
- Woman
- Person of color (defined broadly as identifying as non-White)
- Have completed at least four criminal justice courses in the last 5 years

I am interested in hearing about your experiences in a criminal justice program at a rural community college. I am particularly interested in the strategies you have used to overcome barriers and the support you either received or wished you had received. Each interviewee will be assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity in any publication or report based on my findings. **There will be two interviews**, and each interview will take between 45–60 minutes. The interviews can take place in-person, virtually (Zoom), or a combination of those.

There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to research, and the findings could lead to an improved experience for women of color who enroll in the criminal justice program in the future. If you are interested in participating in the study, please email me as soon as possible. You can suggest a day and time that suits you, and I’ll do my best to be available.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Dave Dammen
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY
A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY EXAMINING WOMEN OF COLOR’S EXPERIENCES AS THEY PURSUE A CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROGRAM

Investigators

Name: David Dammon
Dept: Counseling and Higher Education
Phone: 815-289-9658

Name: __________________________
Dept: _________
Phone: _______________

Name: __________________________
Dept: _________
Phone: _______________

Key Information

- This is a voluntary research study on the experiences of women of color while in a rural community college criminal justice program.

- This qualitative case study involves answering questions in two 45–60-minute interviews held in person or via Zoom based on participants’ preference.

- There are no personal benefits to participants. Risks for participating are minimal; participants may experience heightened emotions or feel triggered by recalling experiences they had in the criminal justice program. Participants have the right to stop the interview at any point in time or to skip a question.

Description of the Study

The purpose of the study is gain information on the experiences of women of color in a community college criminal justice program. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: participate in an interview, review summary data for accuracy, and provide feedback where appropriate.

Risks and Benefits

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study, which include feeling uncomfortable sharing some of your experiences or experiencing heightened emotions while sharing your feelings. Participants have the right to stop the interview at any time or skip a question.

There are no personal benefits to participants. The study will benefit the field of criminal justice and higher education by providing insights into the experiences of women of color in a rural criminal justice program and may lead to changes to improve student experiences in the future.

Confidentiality

- This study is confidential. All participants will be assigned a pseudonym. Participants will only be referred to by their pseudonym in any published manuscript or report based on the findings.

- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a
password-protected file. The audio tape recordings of the interview will only be accessed by the researcher, they will be erased or destroyed once the dissertation process is completed. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

Your Rights

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to skip any question or research activity, as well as to withdraw completely from participation at any point during the process.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time, feel free to contact the researcher, David J. Dammon II, at Z1875413@students.niu.edu or by telephone at 815-289-9658. You may also contact the chair for this research, Dr. Gudrun Nyunt, at gnyunt@niu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at 815-753-8588.

Future Use of the Research Data

Your information collected as a part of this research will not be used or distributed for future research, even if all identifiers are removed.

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

_________________________________________________________  ________________
Participant’s Signature                                 Date

I give my consent to be audio recorded (or video recorded, as appropriate) during the interview.

_________________________________________________________  ________________
Participant’s Signature                                 Date
APPENDIX C

KEY QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWEE
Prior to beginning an interview, I will read this to the interviewee:

I would like to give you an idea of how the interview will go. I will begin with general questions about your background and education, then move on to having you answer some key questions related to the topic at hand by telling me your story. After each story, I may ask a few clarifying questions. Some questions will be the same after each story and others will be different. To be very clear, there are no right or wrong answers. The goal of this interview is to gain an understanding of your experience. It should feel more like a conversation than a formal interview.

As we have previously discussed, you are to use an alias or pseudonym for the interview. Please tell me what pseudonym you have chosen? _________________________ Okay, from now on you will be known as __________________ for identification in this study. Your real name will not be recorded or documented and if you or I inadvertently use your true name during the interview, I will ensure it is replaced with the pseudonym you have chosen in the transcript of the interview. Do you have any questions before we continue? ____

Interview #1

1. What led you to pursue a degree to career in criminal justice?

2. Who, if anyone, encouraged you to pursue criminal justice?
   a. Please tell me more about the conversations you had with these individuals regarding your interest in the criminal justice program?
   b. How did having these conversations impact your decision to participate in the criminal justice program?
3. Who, if anyone, discouraged you from participating in the criminal justice program?
   a. Please tell me more about the conversations you had with these individuals regarding your interest in the criminal justice program.
   b. How did having these conversations impact your decision to participate in the criminal justice program?

4. Starting with when you first enrolled into the program, how was the transition to being a student in a criminal justice program?
   a. What expectations about what your experience would be like did you have when you first started the program?
      i. How do you think being a woman of color influenced those expectations?
   b. How did your actual experience compare to these expectations?
   c. What, if anything, surprised you as you started in the program?
   d. What challenges, if any, did you encounter as you started in the program?
      i. How do you think being a woman of color influenced those challenges?
   e. What strategies did you use to overcome these challenges?
      i. How do you think being a woman of color influenced the strategies you used to overcome challenges?
   f. What support did you have early on in the program?
      i. How do you think being a woman of color influenced what support systems you had access to?

5. As you started to move along in the program, can you please tell me about your experiences in the program?
   a. What were your relationships with peers like?
i. How do you think being a woman of color shaped those relationships?

b. What were your relationships with faculty like?

i. How do you think being a woman of color shaped your relationships with faculty?

c. What challenges did you encounter as you moved further along in the program?

i. How do you think being a woman of color shaped those challenges?

d. What strategies did you use to overcome these challenges?

i. How do you think being a woman of color influenced the strategies you used to overcome challenges?

e. What support did you have as you moved along in the program?

i. How do you think being a woman of color influenced what support systems you had access to?

6. We have talked about how being a woman of color shaped your transition and experiences in the program. Are there any other things related to your experiences as a woman of color in a criminal justice program that we have not yet touched on?

That concludes the first interview. May I contact you if I have any follow up questions or the need to clarify an answer? ________ Do you have any questions for me at this time? ________ Your next scheduled interview is on _____________________.

Thank you for your time and sharing your experience and knowledge, have a great day.
Interview #2

Thank you for meeting with me again. In this second interview, I would like to talk more about your experiences in the criminal justice program, ask follow-up questions from the first interview and some additional questions related to the college environment, and talk about your future in the profession.

1. [Insert any follow-up questions from the first interview or questions that I was unable to cover during the first interview.]

2. I have spent some time reviewing the interview transcripts of all participants from the first round of interviews. In doing so, several things stood out to me. I’d like to share those with you and get your feedback or reaction.

   a. [insert emerging themes]

3. Thank you! I also have a few more questions to just dive a little deeper into your experiences within the program. If you can think back to when you first started in the program, what was that 1st day of class like for you?

   a. How did you feel that day?
   b. What stands out, whether in a positive or negative way?
   c. How did you feel about pursuing a career in criminal justice after that 1st day or the first couple of days?

4. Now that you’ve gotten to know people in the program a little better, can you describe to me what it is like for you, as a woman of color, to walk into a classroom in our criminal justice program?

   a. How do you feel when you enter a classroom?
   b. How do you feel during class discussions?
5. In our first interview, we talked quite a bit about the challenges you encountered while transitioning into and after you were in the criminal justice program. Are there any other challenges or barriers that you encountered in the program?

a. As you reflect on your entire experience in the criminal justice program so far—from first deciding to enroll in the program to taking courses and being part of the community of the criminal justice program—what challenges or barriers that you encountered stand out the most to you?

b. How do you think your identity as a woman of color has influenced the challenges or barriers that you have encountered?

6. In our first interview, you mentioned the following support systems that you had access to: [insert support systems]. Are there any other support systems or supportive individuals that helped and cheered you during your time in the program?

a. As you reflect on your entire experience in the criminal justice program so far—from first deciding to enroll in the program to taking courses and being part of the community of the criminal justice program—what support systems have been most important to you?

b. How do you think your identity as a woman of color has influenced the support systems that you have had access to?

c. How, if at all, have faculty or staff provided support to you in the program?
   i. If no, what could faculty or staff have done to better support you?

7. What, if any, college programs or support services have you taken advantage of?

a. What has your experience been with these programs and support services?

b. What additional support programs or services do you wish existed at the institution?
8. What do you think the college or program could do to better support women of color as they navigate college and, in particular, the criminal justice program?

9. How have your experiences in the program shaped your interest in pursuing a criminal justice degree?

   a. How do you think your identity as a woman of color played into this?

10. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences as a woman of color in the criminal justice program?

That concludes the interviews. May I contact you if I have any follow up questions or the need to clarify an answer? _________ Do you have any questions for me at this time? _________

Thank you for your time and sharing your experience and knowledge, have a great day.