S.I.S. (suffering in Silence): The influence of Educational attainment on Black Women's Health

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ABSTRACT

S.I.S. (SUFFERING IN SILENCE): THE INFLUENCE OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT ON BLACK WOMEN’S HEALTH

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Northern Illinois University, 2020
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The purpose of this qualitative, narrative inquiry study was to explore the influence of educational attainment on Black women’s perceptions of their health. Empirical research indicates the causes of stress and other health concerns pertaining to Black women are often rooted in racism and discrimination. Within the literature, the barriers that many African American women face within the educational system on all levels are discussed. However, there are few studies that have specifically researched the connection between educational attainment regarding receiving bachelor’s degrees or higher and how or if that has an influence on Black women’s health. For the purposes of my research, I interviewed 15 Black women in the Midwest region.

The findings indicate that there needs to be more work done within the educational institution regarding the support of Black women. There needs to be safe spaces on campus for these women to talk about their issues, there needs to be more counselors or therapists of color at institutions, and there needs to be strategies set in place to alleviate the high amounts of racism and discrimination that this particular group encounters inside and outside of the classroom, such as cultural competency classes for both students and staff who are White.
S.I.S. (SUFFERING IN SILENCE): THE INFLUENCE OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT ON BLACK WOMEN’S HEALTH

BY

QUIANA CHAKEENA JONES
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:
Kathryn Jaekel
DEDICATION

To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: Without Your love, guidance and protection, I would not be where I am today. You have shown me that through You anything is possible, and if I ask anything of You, according to Your will, You will hear me.

To my mother, Juanita: Thank you for always supporting and loving me unconditionally. Even though you never told me your full story, because of this journey, I respect you and your level of strength as a Black woman and a mother. No words can summate how much I love and appreciate you.

To my committee, Dr. Jackel, Dr. Gyant, and Dr. Edghill-Walden: Thank you for taking this tedious journey with me and helping me with any and everything that I could have possibly asked of you to do for me.

To my participants: Thank you for sharing your precious stories with me and trusting me to tell them the best way possible. I would not be at this stage without you.

To all my sisters that are still suffering in silence: I hear you, and your voices matter in this world.
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PROLOGUE

Can we ever catch a break? That is the question I ask myself when I think about the physical, sexual, verbal, psychological, emotional, economic, and academic abuse that African Americans face on a consistent everyday basis. Every single day there is always something on the news or in the paper related to African Americans, and it is not always good. If we are not getting brutally murdered or injured by police, we are falling behind the other races in academics across the board. We are in the lead for all mortality rates among some of the most chronic diseases and illnesses (e.g., HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and high blood pressure), most of which are fully preventable. How is that possible? We have been in America since 1619! However, when I look at how we got here and what Black people have been going through all this time, it makes me rethink that question. Black people did not arrive in America in fancy clothing and jewelry with our families by our side. We arrived in overcrowded slave ships, beaten, kidnapped, raped, and tortured with no family by our side to guide us into this new land. We were not welcomed with open arms; we were chained, branded, and sold off like cattle to the highest bidder. For example, Wilder (2013) talked about how institutions of higher education that are held in such high regard today were built on the backs of slaves and continuously funded through the trade of African slaves. What Wilder (2013) discussed is a prime example of how academic institutions have always been rooted in racism and oppression by transforming slave traders into trustees and college founders and to this day create educational barriers for Black people.
In terms of health, racial science was created by colonial scholars which allowed them to defend the social order of slavery by forging biological supremacy theories that discussed the differences between the White and Black races and showed a “genetic” inferiority among the Black race (Wilder, 2013). These issues of racism, discrimination and oppression did not stop with the end of slavery. From dealing with Jim Crow laws of segregation, lynching, injustice of slavery coupled with scientific exploitation such as the Tuskegee experiment (Jones, 1993) and countless forms of injustice, it is easy to say that Black people have had it bad since we came to America in 1619. There are countless studies, books, and articles of the discrimination, racism and oppression that Black men have faced in America. However, Black women are always forgotten. We were just as badly enslaved and beaten as well as raped during slavery. According to hooks (1981), no other group in America has had their identity socialized out of existence as have Black women.

For example, very few people know about the continuous oppression, racism, discrimination, and injustices that Black women continue to face. For example, not many people know about Henrietta Lacks, whose cancerous tumor cells were stolen from her body without her knowing, then turned into the first human cell line (HeLa) that has created billions of dollars for the medical and pharmaceutical industry (Skloot, 2010). Her cells were used to create the polio vaccine and are still being used today in medical research. People also do not know that her family (her daughter in particular) was called into labs to get blood samples to further study their genetic line without their knowledge. What people also do not know is that after her death, her family never received any form of compensation for this scientific breakthrough because of Henrietta’s cells (Skloot, 2010). The physicians never told her family but they did allow her children to suffer for years and live in poverty. Many people believe that because Henrietta
lacked a formal education the doctors were able to take advantage of her lack of knowledge about patient privacy and privilege. It is stories like Henrietta’s that made me want to research the oppressive state that Black women are in even today which causes us to have so many health disparities. So, the question now becomes: Will Black women ever catch a break?
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that between 2000 and 2018 the percentage of Blacks between the ages of 25 and 29 years old who completed at least a high school diploma increased from 87% to 92%. Looking at the same group, the number of individuals who attained a bachelor’s degree or higher increased from 18% to 23% and the number of individuals who completed a master’s degree or higher increased from 4 to 5%. Although there has been a continuous increase in educational attainment among Blacks, there is still a significant difference compared to their White counterpart, whose scores were twice as high in each category (e.g., Whites who received a bachelor’s degree or higher increased from 34 to 44%). When comparing Black and White women specifically, there continues to be a major difference in numbers. The proportion of Black women who received a bachelor’s degree or higher in the U.S. in 2018 was 26% versus White women at 48% (NCES, 2018). According to NCES (2018), the proportion of Black women who received a master’s degree or higher in the U.S. in 2018 was 6% compared to white women at 12%.

The numbers are even more staggering when it comes to the health of Black women. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) website (2016b), the leading cause of death for Black people is heart disease. Black women are 60% more likely to have high blood pressure than White women. Cancer is the second leading cause of death for both Black and White individuals (CDC, 2016a). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Office of Minority Health (OMH) (2016a), in 2012 Black women were just as likely to get breast cancer as White women but 40% more likely to die from it compared to White women. Black women are 2.1 times more likely to get stomach cancer than White women and 2.4 times more likely to die from it than White women (OMH, 2016a).

The third leading cause of death for Blacks is stroke (CDC, 2016a). According to OMH (2016g), Black women are 1.3 times more likely to die from a stroke than their White counterparts. Some of these chronic illnesses and diseases are also connected to obesity, high cholesterol, and smoking. In 2014, Black women were twice as likely to be obese than White women (OMH, 2016f). People who are overweight are more likely to have high blood pressure and high cholesterol, which are both common factors for heart disease and stroke. According to OMH (2016b), more than 80% of people who are obese have diabetes. Black women are 2.4 times more likely to die from complications due to diabetes than White women (OMH, 2016c). Black people are 10% more likely to report having serious psychological distress compared to Whites (OMH, 2016e). According to OMH (2016e), Black women are 1.3 times more likely to have feelings of sadness and hopelessness, 1.7 times more likely to feel like everything is an effort, and more likely to feel a sense of worthlessness than White women.

Some of the most alarming numbers come from HIV/AIDS statistics for Black women. According to OMH (2016d), Black women have 22 times the AIDS rate as White women, and they are 14 times more likely to die from HIV/AIDS. All these health issues for Black women have many underlining causes such as stress, lack of support, low socioeconomic status, cultural views, and lack of education or knowledge about health disparities. What is most alarming is that all the mentioned underlying factors to these health disparities can be linked to racism, oppression, and discrimination toward Black people and more specifically Black women,
especially within the educational system. According to the constitution of the world health organization, health is defined as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. Sartorius (2006) states that health can be defined in three different ways: the absence of any disease or impairment, a state that allows the individual to adequately cope with all demands of daily life, and a state of balance or equilibrium that a person has between oneself and one’s social and physical environment. For the purpose of this study, health will be defined as having an equal balance of physical, mental and social health.

According to Harrell (2000), the stress process is a relevant framework for investigating mental health issues among people of color. Harrell (2000) described various forms of racism and how they affect the well-being of individuals and groups through different experiences they may have in everyday life. Harrell (2000) felt that experiences of racism are embedded within interpersonal, collective, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts and can produce tremendous amounts of stress. Certain racist experiences can create anxiety and a heightened sense of anger and sadness that can ultimately have damaging effects on the mind and body. Racism-related stress has been associated with physiological outcomes such as hypertension, cigarette smoking and heart problems. Racism can also trigger symptoms of depression, distress and eating problems (Harrell, 2000). For the purposes of this study, racism will be defined as a set of beliefs, attitudes, institutional arrangements, and acts that diminish individuals because of characteristics of their ethnic affiliation (Clark, Anderson, Clark & Williams, 1999).

Based on the research done by Harrell (2000), racism plays a role in functional well-being that can be related to school achievement, test performance, job performance and parental functioning for Blacks. These health outcomes create a barrier for African Americans who are in pursuit of a higher level of education. These barriers can cause African American students to feel
that they lack a support system, which creates a lasting impact on their view of the educational system as well. The discriminatory and racist experiences can ultimately have an impact on Black students’ learning experience in the classroom because it can make them feel like they are invisible and their voice is not being heard (Tuitt, 2010). For my project, I will use the term Black and African American interchangeably to describe the participants within the study.

According to Husband (2016), racism experienced as a stressor can have a negative impact on African Americans’ mental, physical, and emotional health. Through empirical research, it is shown that stressors related to racism are proven to have an impact on life satisfaction, self-esteem, and health. For example, internalized racism, a devaluing of cultural norms that leads to a low perception of self due to White superiority, can create negative health behaviors for African Americans. Williams and Williams-Morris (2000) noted a positive correlation between internalized racism and alcohol consumption among 289 Black women who were surveyed for a study. These studies are only a few examples of how racism is connected to health, it not only has a negative impact on Blacks, but Black women specifically.

According to Bowen (2012), women of color in academia experience more isolation and stigma than White women and minority males do. Schools tend to address gender and race separately, which forces women of color to choose one trait over the other. Race ends up being the focus because gender issues are based on White women, whereas women of color are excluded (Jackson 1998, as cited in Bowen, 2012). In this case, Black women are limited in their ability to confront the connection between their race and gender inside of an academic setting. Even racial battle fatigue can be gendered. According to Quaye, Karikari, Allen, Okello, and Carter (2019), due to the intersection of sexism and racism for Black women, their experiences of racial battle fatigue are different from even Black men. Harris-Perry (2011) talked about how
Black women are often misrepresented because of the way others (i.e., White people, Black men and other people of color) fail to see them as human beings and did not allow them the space to be themselves. Focusing on institutions of higher education, L.D. Patton (2016) discussed that even though these institutions say that they are committed to equity, diversity, and inclusion, in reality they were designed to serve wealthy, White, Christian men. The so-called “diversity activities” that many of these higher education institutions offer focus on teaching White men how to work with “others,” instead of disrupting systems of domination and oppression that limit the full participation of minorities (Patton, 2016). Once again there is a great deal of research that exists about racism, and there is a lot of research about health; however, there is a gap within the literature about how the two are connected and, specifically, how they impact Black women.

**Statement of the Problem**

Based on previous studies, Black women have had to navigate through racism and discrimination-based experiences throughout their college careers that cause feelings of isolation and higher stress levels than their White counterparts (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014; Gardner & Holley, 2011). Many Black women have experienced microaggressive forms of discrimination throughout their college careers that send messages of inferiority based on historically negative stereotypes (Cole, 2009; O’Connor, 2003; Settles, 2006; Sue, 2010; Williams & Nichols, 2012). Researchers have stated that stress can be connected to an explanation of poor health, especially among African American women who suffer from higher levels of stress due to environmental factors such as racism (Geronimus, Hicken, Keene & Bound, 2006; Lewis, Mendenhall, Hardwood & Huntt, 2012; Woods-Gisombe, 2010). The problem is not only the fact that African American women experience racism and discrimination (Harris-Perry, 2011), but they are experiencing them in the realm of academia (i.e., in the
classroom, on campus and off campus) (Lewis et al., 2012) which creates a barrier for them academically. This also creates adverse health effects such as high blood pressure, weight gain, and other poor health outcomes (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Clark, Anderson, Clark & Williams, 1999; Harrell 2000; Shorter-Goeden, 2004; Woods-Gisombe & Black, 2010).

Historically, Black women’s voices have been constantly silenced, especially within the realm of education. This is also part of the problem because society does not acknowledge the suffering that Black women face within education. Since there is such a shortage on the actual research that connects the pursuit of educational attainment of Black women to their poor health outcomes, there will be a continuous cycle of adverse health outcomes for this group of Black women who are in pursuit of a higher level of education.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative inquiry study is to explore the influence of educational attainment on Black women’s perceptions of their health. As stated above, empirical research indicates the causes of stress and other health concerns pertaining to Black women are often rooted in racism and discrimination (Harrell, 2010; Woods-Gisombe, 2010). Within the literature, the barriers that many African American women face within the educational system on all levels are discussed (Fordham, 1988; Harris & Marsh, 2010; Marsh, 2013; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Smith & Lalonde, 2003). However, there are few studies that have specifically researched the connection between educational attainment regarding receiving bachelor’s degrees or higher and how or if that has an influence on Black women’s health. As such, the purpose of this project is to add to the literature by exploring Black women’s perceptions of health and well-being in relationship to their levels of education. For the purposes of my research, I interviewed 15 Black women in the Midwest region.
Research Questions

The primary questions guiding this research study are:

- **RQ1**: What were Black women’s perceptions regarding their health during their journey of educational attainment?
- **RQ2**: How did Black women perceive racism contributing to their health during their educational journey in higher education?

My first research question focuses on subgroups such as barriers, conflicts, experiences of racism and prejudice, levels of stress and overall health of Black women in order to help answer the question of how institutional racism is linked to Black women’s health. My second research question focuses on the perceptions of racism Black women faced in pursuit of their education, in order to help answer the question of how racism may have influenced or impacted Black women’s health.

Significance of the Study

My research focuses on taking the first wave of experiences of Black women and pairing it with a public health perspective that shows various factors that affect the health of Black women and their overall well-being. Discrimination is a constant experience for African Americans. Due to the vast diaspora, there are some individuals who identify as Black, and there are those who identify as being African American. For the purposes of this study I will use them interchangeably based on the participants’ identification and the research that I use for my project.

Research shows that Black people report higher levels of discrimination compared to White people at every level, whether it’s gender, age, education, or income (Chadwick & DeBlaere, 2019; Collins, 1998, 2002; Forman, Williams & Jackson, 1997; Greer, 2008).
Previous research, however, has not focused on the gender differences among Black people in response to discrimination or racism. It is important to study gender in response to discriminatory experiences to understand the ramifications it has on health, education and SES for Black people. According to Banks, Khon-Wood, and Spencer (2006), the examination of gender as a moderator will help illuminate the intersections of gender, mental health and discrimination. Research has shown that physical and mental health problems are more frequent among women, young adults, Black people, and Hispanic people (Thoits, 2010). People with low education, income, or occupational prestige have the highest rates of morbidity, psychological distress and mental disorder (Elo & Preston, 1996; Hayward et al., 2000; House, 2002, as cited by Thoits, 2010). More specifically, women and young adults of minority groups had significantly more chronic difficulties in their lives and faced more burdens (Thoits, 2010). In order for issues of discrimination, oppression, and stress to be addressed within the educational system, there needs to be more research conducted on an academic and health-related level to help Black women not only to cope, but to surpass these issues in order to strengthen their academic achievement.

The analysis provided within the literature review is important because it serves a dual purpose. The first purpose is that it coincides with previous theories that disrupt racism, sexism and discrimination toward Black women, especially within higher education. Inequities in the school often cause Black students stress and cause them to disengage from the educational process (Smith & Lalonde, 2003). Identifying the range of racialized identities (Marsh, 2013) that high-achieving students employ within the school context could help school administrators, teachers and parents understand how racial identity can be beneficial both mentally and physically to Black students, especially Black women. The evidence that was provided in Smith
and Lalonde (2003) showed that Black students who have a stronger racial identity are psychologically healthier.

The second purpose that this literature review has is that it can have a positive effect within the healthcare field. According to Hankin (2006), understanding the kinds of motives, obstacles, frustrations, and supports that shape the experiences of Black women can help implement proper treatment for hypertension as well as other healthcare issues that Black women face. With this level of understanding healthcare providers can increase their knowledge of health causes and outcomes for African American women. Achieving this level of understanding can also help create culturally appropriate interventions and strategies that can decrease health disparities among Black women. The evidence that is provided through the literature shows the connection between the educational barriers African American women face that in the process causes extreme amounts of stress and lack of care that can create other health problems such as hypertension, obesity and even breast cancer. However, even though there has been research on the mental and physical health of Black people, there still needs to be more attention paid specifically to the link between educational attainment and perceptions of health for Black women due to racism and discrimination.

**Conceptual Framework**

I used the minority stress theory as part of the conceptual framework for this study. Minority stress theory describes chronically high levels of stress faced by individuals in stigmatized groups, more specifically, minority groups (Myer, 2003). The stress that these minority groups face can be caused by poor social support, low SES, prejudice and discrimination. Many studies have shown that minorities who experience high levels of stress due to prejudice and discrimination have adverse health effects such as high blood pressure and
anxiety (Myer, 2007). Eventually, this high level of stress can lead to poor mental and physical health for minorities.

Minority stress theory distinguishes between two stress processes: distal and proximal. Distal stress processes find that being in a minority group is associated with distal stressors such as rejection, prejudice, and discrimination (Dohrenwend, 2000). These types of stressors are external to the individual within the minority group. Distal stressors are higher among racial minority groups compared to their dominant-group counterparts. Proximal stressors are internal for minorities, and they depend on the exposure of distal stressors. Proximal stressors are related to fear of rejection, experiences of prejudice and a dislike for one’s own minority group due to a prejudice experience. Proximal stressors have been explored through stereotype threat, which is when minorities are at risk of conforming to a stereotype that has been placed on their specific group, more specifically for African Americans. When African Americans are reminded of their minority status within academics, they face a high level of anxiety that causes them to suffer academically (Steele & Aronson, 1995). My use of the minority stress theory shows how racial discrimination and prejudice within the social or academic setting can have a negative effect on the health of African Americans (Clark, Anderson, Clark & Williams, 1999; Dohrenwend, 2000; Myer, 2003). This theory further supports my argument that there is a correlation between educational attainment and health.

**Summary**

This chapter serves as an overview of my project. This chapter covers why this research is important to the realm of academia as well as serves purpose within the healthcare field as well. My research focuses on taking the first wave of experiences of Black women and pairing with a public health perspective that shows various factors that affect the health of Black women
and their overall well-being. Even though there has been some research done on the effects that racism and oppression have on the education of Black women, there has not been direct research connecting education and public health, more specifically how it affects Black women. There is a need to look deeper into this connection in order to provide more insight into Black women’s health and education.

Within this chapter, I discussed the research questions that were posed within the project that relate to racism, discrimination, educational attainment, and health. Discrimination is a constant experience for African Americans. Research shows that Black people report higher levels of discrimination compared to White people at every level, whether its gender, age, education, or income (Forman, Williams & Jackson, 1997). Previous research, however, has not focused on the gender differences among Black people in response to discrimination or racism. It is important to study gender in response to discriminatory experiences to understand the ramifications it has on health, education, and SES for Black people.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within this chapter, the literature review, theoretical framework, and theoretical perspective are discussed. This review of literature first discusses how racism impacts educational attainment for Black women. The discussion of racism within education is then followed by a discussion of how racism and discrimination impact Black women’s health. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the theoretical framework and perspective and how they are connected to the project.

Racism and discrimination have been shown to be a major barrier for African Americans. Racism and discrimination impact the lives of African Americans on a daily basis (Armstrong, Chavez, Jones, Harris & Harris, 2019; Barnes & Lightsey, 2005; Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds & Cancelli, 2000). Specifically, racism and discrimination have created structural barriers when it comes to educational attainment (Cohen-Marks & Stout, 2011). Black women have unique experiences that are shaped by race and gender. Black women have constantly reported subtle forms of racism, discrimination, and isolation in pursuit of educational attainment. Often, the result of these various barriers is disengagement with the pursuit of educational attainment (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Even though Blacks have made major progress in educational attainment since desegregation, there is still a lack of representation within higher education on all levels compared to their White counterparts. Studies have shown that Black women have had the smallest increase in degree attainment (Pierce, 2011; Walpole, 2008).
Historically, educational attainment has been restricted for Blacks by institutional racism and discrimination. Studies have shown that the lack of educational attainment and retention for Black women can be related to prejudices and discrimination that they experience both inside and outside of the educational system (Gay, 2004). Certain policies and reforms within higher education throughout history have limited the educational progress of African Americans. Progressive change within higher education has not occurred since the 1970s, and policy makers are challenged to become aware of the structural barriers that produce racial disparities in college access and attainment for African Americans.

There are several arguments that expose racism, discrimination, and White supremacy within higher education that impact educational attainment for Black women. The first argument is acknowledging the oppressive past of education by examining works from Wilder (2013) that examined the link between Ivy League schools and slavery. The second argument focuses on how institutions engaged in oppression from the beginning through racist narratives and legislation. Since institutions used slavery for capital gain, and Black people were only seen as property, the end result is that education has always been extended to White men, while Black people are still excluded in various forms. It can still be seen within curricula, campus policies and campus spaces. The third argument focuses on higher education institutions being rooted in racism and White supremacy and only benefitting the dominant society (Harper, Patton & Wooden, 2009; Patton, 2016; Patton, McEwen, Rendon & Howard-Hamilton, 2007). Racist ideologies are produced and learned within the institutions and then carried over into law, science, religion and education. These same ideologies corrupt everyday thinking and further exclude African Americans and create constant barriers within education (Patton, 2016). The
next section discusses the impact of institutional and internal racism on educational attainment for Black students.

**Racism and the Pursuit of Educational Attainment**

Fordham (1988) discussed the term “racelessness” and how it affects Black students’ academic success. To get to this term, a study was conducted at Capital High in 1982 on how Black students cope with “acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). The authors describe the social and cultural identity of Blacks being framed around “fictive kinship.” Fordham and Ogbu (1986) described this term as a kinship-like connection between a group of people (i.e., Blacks) not related to each other but who maintain a sense of closeness and unity due to race, social, political, and economic status. A total of 24 eleventh-grade students were interviewed for the study (12 men and 12 women) and then broken down further into two separate groups: underachieving and high-achieving (6 men and 6 women) students. It was shown that underachieving students consciously and unconsciously avoided efforts that may have suggested that they desired to “act White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

The reason behind Black female underachievement at Capital High was due to the fear of being rejected by their peers, being labeled a “Brainiac,” and lack of support. Even though they were receiving good grades, the higher achieving Black students were seen as more vulnerable to the perception of “acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) wrote that because these students chose to pursue school success and were vulnerable, they developed “sex-specific” strategies or coping mechanisms for “acting White.” The male students believed that being labeled a “Brainiac” or “acting White” raised questions about their manhood because
it was rumored that the males at the school who took advanced placement classes were homosexual.

In order to minimize this stereotype, most of them resorted to behaviors that suggested that they were class clowns who did not work hard to receive good grades. The higher achieving males also chose friends who served as protectors in exchange for help with homework assignments and tests. The high-achieving female students developed strategies that made their academic achievements invisible to their peers. This was done by not bragging about their academic achievements and becoming a comedian in the classroom. Most of the female students stated that appearing invisible within their academic achievements minimized the stress that they experienced in school from their peers in relation to “acting White.” These female students essentially became a visible but invisible person. This persona feeds into Collins’s (1986) BFT (Black feminist thought), where she talked about Black women being the “outsider-within.” The Black female students at Capital High become invisible (academically) in order to become visible in an oppressive society.

The previous study allowed Fordham (1988) to examine the idea of Blacks becoming “un-Black” to attain academic and vertical mobility within the work world. Fordham (1988) talked about the notion of Black people becoming raceless in order to achieve academic success and to secure jobs and positions that are above the typical jobs that Black people are given. Fordham (1988) concluded that due to the results found in the Capital High study and other research about Blacks and academic achievement, “Blackness is a barrier that limits and inhibits vertical mobility in the larger American society” (p.81). At the end of her essay, Fordham (1988) went on to pose a question to Black parents, asking if they were willing to have their children commit to their Black culture and community, which in turn eliminates their individual goals for
success, or were they willing to have their children be defined as successful with little to no commitment to the Black community in order to achieve academic success.

After Fordham’s theory of racelessness was presented, there have been several counter-arguments and studies that have taken place to refute the idea of racelessness for Black people and more specifically for Black girls and women. Smith and Lalonde (2003) argued that a significant relationship exists between racelessness and depression for Black students. A positive Black/Afrocentric identity has been found to be related to higher self-esteem and negatively related to depression (Smith & Lalonde, 2003). A study was conducted at two universities in the city of Toronto with 107 African Canadian participants to examine the link between Black students’ identity, achievement and mental health (Smith & Lalonde, 2003). The study found that the stronger the ties the Black students felt to other Blacks, the greater their confidence was in their academic ability. Students who responded that they had lower racial identity had higher scores of psychological distress. Overall, Black students who had a stronger Black identity reported a greater sense of control over academics, higher self-esteem, and psychological or mental health than those Black students who did not have a strong racial identity (Smith & Lalonde, 2003).

In 2010, Harris and Marsh conducted a study using data from the Maryland Adolescence Development in Context Study (MADICS) to determine if a raceless identity is an effective strategy for Blacks to achieve academic success. The study focused on Black students in seventh and eleventh grades. The study found that Black students who reported some regret about being Black had lower academic achievement compared to those who reported the exact opposite. The results from this study did not find any evidence that raceless Blacks have higher educational aspirations than their counterparts. The study went on to find that Black students who believe
they benefit from the success of other Blacks had greater achievement compared to other Black students who did not have this belief (Harris & Marsh, 2010). The findings from this study show that racelessness is not an effective strategy for academic success among Blacks and are consistent with the previous study’s results showing the importance of having a positive racial identity for the academic success of Black students.

Marsh (2013) went on to conduct a study on racial identity and young high-achieving Black women. The study was conducted using nine female students in the twelfth grade at a science and math academy (SAMA) located on a college campus. Marsh (2013) interviewed these students to test Fordham’s theory of racelessness and to examine the strategies they use to be successful academically. After interviewing the female students for the study, Marsh (2013) found that the young Black women never attempted to remove racial markers. The young women recognized their purpose was to succeed at the academy and within their future endeavors. Instead of developing a raceless identity to be successful, like Fordham suggested, they acknowledged the difficulty they faced with being stereotyped as “geeks” or “nerds” by their peers and embraced their racial identity and the challenges they faced at the diverse school. These Black women said that they joined Black clubs that spoke to their needs to balance their roles as being Black and being a woman (Marsh, 2013). The findings from this study not only go against the idea of being raceless but should also suggest to schools and educators that they need to become more culturally receptive when it come to the needs of Black women.

According to Winkle-Wagner and Locks (2013), diversity in higher education enhances education for everyone. This need for diversity relates to faculty just as much as it does for students. Patton and Catching (2009) conducted a study using counter-storytelling from Black faculty members to highlight racial profiling experiences. The critical race theory was applied to
the study to provide a clear understanding of the experiences of the 13 Black faculty who participated in the study. Through the counter-narratives the participants were able to talk about the oppressive experiences that they faced in the classroom. They were constantly challenged by White students and forced to prove their credibility and shown a genuine lack of respect within the classroom. The counter-narratives also touched on the topic of the lack of mentors for Black students and faculty and the need for mentors who “get it.”

Linder, Quaye, Lange, Roberts, Lacy and Okello, (2019) conducted a study that consisted of 25 graduate and undergraduate students who engaged in different types of activism at their institutions of higher education. It was found that the participants engaged in activism as a way to survive in their “minoritized bodies” inside of college campuses and universities that they felt were designed to advance traditional forms of learning and formal education. Linder et al. (2019) went on to say that students with minoritized identities experience their campuses as not inclusive. Because of these students’ constant activism, they reported that their schoolwork suffered because they were distracted from learning. The participants went on to say that they were so mentally exhausted from oppressive experiences that they could not concentrate on their studies. Overall, when students are not given the opportunity to just be students, they take on the role and responsibilities that administrators should be carrying out. They receive backlash from administrators and experience tremendous levels of exhaustion and burnout. The study shows that minority students have to focus on being students on top of managing racist and discriminatory environments, which is something that their White counterparts do not have to do. This helps create an unequal learning environment for minority students compared to their Whiter counterparts.
Museus and Quaye (2009) conducted face-to-face interviews with 30 undergraduates from various racial/ethnic backgrounds (Asian, Black, and Latina/o) who held a leadership position within their predominantly White institution (PWI). The authors discovered that the students’ precollege culture helped shape the dispositions, perceptions and experiences these students had during college. For example, students of color who came from a predominantly White culture viewed their college as diverse, compared to students of color from predominantly minority or racially mixed culture, who viewed the campus as “racially and culturally homogenous” (Museus & Quaye, 2009). Another finding within the study was that students who do not seek cultural diversity but are sensitive to racial issues tend to benefit more from racial and ethnic minority groups. The study also showed that students from predominantly minority culture who attend a PWI will experience higher levels of cultural dissonance, which can increase stressors while trying to adjust to the culture of a PWI. The authors also noted that if students of color feel pressured to acclimate to the dominate culture it can cause a certain level of conflict and tension. Muses and Quaye (2009) went on to say that these students’ connections to their cultural heritage can have a positive impact on them and their success levels as college students. Administrators must learn/understand cultural norms and differences in order to understand the struggles that students of color face while adjusting to PWIs. This will allow administrators to understand various college experiences that students of color face.

Bowen (2012) stated that women of color who are students, specifically Black women, have to overcome several challenges: they have to overcome stereotypes associated with their math and science abilities that are based on their race and gender, even though it is known within institutions of higher education that support is essential to students’ success; women of color receive less mentorship and are challenged by the educational setting that they are in.
Specifically, Black women within academia report that minority male faculty seem to hold the same views as their White colleagues in relation to their perceptions of their abilities to be successful within academia. These Black male mentors do not know the barriers that Black women face as students. Bowen (2012) conducted a student survey to examine whether minority students who are women majoring in the sciences have different experiences than minority males within the same field. Fourteen percent of both groups experienced overt racism from faculty. Almost a third of the women reported that they questioned their own qualifications for being in the field. African American students in the study who were women reported less faculty encouragement compared to their Black male counterparts. Black women within the study also reported that they felt that the faculty on their campuses felt that minority students can only be accepted to college with the help of affirmative action. They also reported that faculty treated them as “exceptions” while their male counterparts were treated as the norm (Bowen, 2012). For example, some of the women reported that faculty made comments such as, “Wow! I had no idea you knew how to do that!” (p. 128). Bowen (2012) noted that the Black women who reported the greatest invisibility were the ones who had at least one parent with a college degree. The study supports my argument that Black women face higher levels of stress within the academic setting, which can have an impact on their health.

Shavers and Moore (2014) conducted a study that focused on the experiences of Black women at predominantly White institutions. They used Black feminist thought in order to provide a voice to the unique experiences that Black women in doctoral programs face at PWIs. Even though Black women made up 65.6% of doctoral degrees awarded to African Americans in 2006-7, Black women face many obstacles within academia and are often ignored (Shavers & Moore 2014). However, Shavers and Moore (2014) noted that there was limited research about
African American women at PWIs, and there was limited research on the experiences of African American women in doctoral programs at PWIs. The study consisted of 15 Black women ranging in age from 24 to 35 who were enrolled in doctoral programs at PWIs. Shavers and Moore (2014) uses the term “double-edge sword” to describe the coping mechanisms that the women in the study described that they use to combat the feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction at PWIs.

The subthemes that emerged from the “double-edge sword” were the “prove them wrong syndrome” and “part of a bigger whole.” These themes serve as resiliency factors to persist academically because of the value that is placed on community and individual goals, family responsibility, determination, adversity, and combating stereotypes. One of the findings that emerged from the study was that Black women must choose persisting academically at the expense of their overall well-being. The mindset to persist or push forward no matter what is beneficial to Black women achieving academic success, but it can be detrimental to other parts of their lives such as mental and physical health, hence the double-edge sword. Shavers and Moore (2014) suggest that there needs to be more research on emotional, social, mental, and physical well-being of Black female students. In turn, this will help achieve insight on students’ academic success as well as finding support systems to help them focus on their overall well-being as well.

Bernard, Hoggard, and Neblett (2018) stated that a possible consequence of discrimination is feelings of impostor phenomenon or imposter syndrome. According to Bernard et al. (2018), imposter syndrome captures self-perceptions of intellectual incompetence among high-achieving individuals and their inability to internalize success. Clance and Imes (1978) defines it as an internal feeling of intellectual phoniness that is experienced by high-achieving minorities. Kumar and Jagacinski (2006) stated that imposters attribute their achievements to
factors such as luck or knowing the right people instead of equating it to their hard work and dedication. Peteet, Montgomery, and Weekes (2015) discussed that when there are intense feelings of imposter syndrome it can interfere with the academic performance of high-achieving minorities. It can also cause them to disengage academically, such as stop attending class or reduce campus activities, have constant feelings of inadequacy, and exhibit an unhealthy behavior to succeed. Minorities report experiencing test anxiety, lack of confidence in academic ability and depression (Bernard et al., 2018).

Bernard et al. (2018) conducted a study with African American first-year students at a PWI to explore the association between racial discrimination, racial identity and the impostor phenomenon. They found that racial discrimination was positively related to higher levels of impostor phenomenon. The authors went on to say that it is possible that racial discrimination at PWIs leads to feelings of social isolation for African Americans, which is a positive predictor of psychological distress that leads to impostor phenomenon. It was also found within the study that attitudes toward racial identity were also associated with the impostor phenomenon. It was believed that racial identity can sometimes act as a resilience factor for African Americans, which would explain the varying levels of impostor phenomenon among the participants within the study.

**Impact of Racism and Discrimination on Health**

Many studies have shown that minority students attending predominantly White institutions felt that their campus environment was hostile, racist, and non-inclusive (Franklin, 2019; Linder et al., 2019; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Quaye & Baxter Magolda, 2007; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). Microaggressions can be subtle or forthright. These feelings usually come from minority students’ encounters with microaggressions that they experience on their college
According to Sue (2010), microaggressions attack multiple layers of a minority such as class, gender, race, and sexuality. A microaggression presents an image to marginalized groups that they are not welcome (Franklin, 2019). Specifically, African American students felt that professors were not interested in their concerns about the microaggressions they experience on campus or inside of the classroom (Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). This caused these students to feel invisible and diminished. This level of exhaustion can ultimately have an impact on African American students’ academic performance.

Husband (2016) describes this level of exhaustion as racial battle fatigue, which results from constant coping with microaggressions on physiological, cultural and emotional levels in an unsupportive environment. Quaye et al. (2019) suggest that racial battle fatigue comes from minorities’ constant emotional management of White people’s feelings and their lack of expressing their emotions in order to protect White people’s feelings. Linder et al. (2019) describe racial battle fatigue as a trauma that is similar to the PTSD that a soldier may experience, for people of color navigate racists and hostile environments that become part of their everyday experiences. Psychological stress responses to racial battle fatigue can be fear, anger, and frustration. Physiological responses can be high blood pressure, headaches, and disturbances in sleep. Behavioral responses can be impatience, increased use of alcohol or drugs, and poor school performance. Franklin (2019) conducted a study with African American and Mexican American undergraduate students, former and current, to explore the impact of coping mechanisms used against racial battle fatigue. It was found that stress that is associated with being a student is heightened by additional racism-related stress for minority students. Specifically, African American students’ psychological and behavioral stress were impacted by microaggressions. Franklin (2019) also found that African American students turned to religion
and spirituality in order to cope with microaggressions. He also noted that the data showed a higher rate of African American females using religion and spirituality to cope with microaggressions.

Bell (2009), in her dissertation entitled *African American Women’s Perceptions of Race, Gender, Socioeconomics, and Stress on Health Outcomes*, discusses African American women’s perceptions of health outcomes based on race, gender, SES, and stress. The purpose of the study was to investigate the impact that race, socioeconomics, and stress has on the health outcomes of African American women (Bell, 2009). According to Bell (2009), because of the elitism and exclusion of “non-Euro-Americans” and women in quantitative studies, the researcher chose to use qualitative research in order to get an in-depth examination of the participants’ life experiences. Bell (2009) used a narrative research method due to the oral traditions of the African American community and the fact that narrative inquiry solicits an uninterrupted, detailed narrative that highlights the actual lived experiences of African American women and their perspectives on how they understand the environment in which they live.

All three women discussed their issues with weight gain that was a result of unhealthy eating due to stress. Part of the stress that they experienced came from economic barriers, but the women also described racial and gender barriers and challenges that they experienced as a major contributor to their stress and poor health. The myth of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) was discussed and the impact it has on the health of Black women. Bell (2009) suggests that Black women have been socialized to believe that they must be strong and full of self-sacrifice in order to be a successful wife, mother, or businesswoman. The women in the study agreed with the SBW myth and said that they are less likely to ask for help because they have been brought up to believe that they have to be able to handle anything. This also increases their level of stress.
According to Bell (2009), this myth creates an unrealistic stereotype with unhealthy expectations for Black women because they are urged to celebrate their ability to triumph over physical, socioeconomic, and relational adversity. In other words, Black women are supposed to celebrate the fact that they have overcome slavery and segregation and continue to deal with ongoing racism and sexism. By using the narrative approach for this study, the Black women gained more confidence and became more comfortable telling their stories because it allowed their voices to be heard. This is a great representation of BFT because it focuses on Black women allowing their voices to be heard and being able to tell their stories in their own way. This study is also a good demonstration of minority stress theory because it focuses on distal stress (i.e., discrimination) of Black women and how it has a negative effect on their health.

In 2001, Boutain conducted a study exploring the relationship between Blacks and their personal accounts of worry and stress and how it effects their high blood pressure. The purpose of this study was to assess the views of Blacks regarding their stress and high blood pressure. The sample population consisted of 15 Black women and 15 Black men. The average age of the participants was 55 who had been diagnosed with hypertension from 2 to 15 years. When the participants were asked about racism, they corrected the interviewer by changing the word to prejudice (Boutain, 2001). Both the men and women expressed similar opinions for worry and stress that was related to prejudice experiences. Due to economic hardships that some of the participants believed were due to prejudice experiences, the participants were not able to properly manage their high blood pressure even with the knowledge of how to maintain their blood pressure. Through narrated interview, Abrums (2004) was able to describe how religious beliefs of poor and working-class churchwomen helped them cope with and resist racism that they encounter within their healthcare experiences. The findings from the study suggested that
Black women received substandard health care even when their insurance and financial circumstances are similar to their White female counterparts. Abrums (2004) found that the Black women in the study felt that this poor treatment was racially motivated and healthcare providers were the biggest perpetrators of the perceived discrimination. These two studies showed that there is a perceived observation by Black women that they are being provided poor treatment by healthcare providers due to discrimination or prejudice and that this ultimately affects their health.

To continue the argument of how racism and discrimination impact Black women, Hankin’s (2006) dissertation, entitled An Exploration of the Perceptions of Discrimination Due to Racism Among Hypertensive African American Women, discussed the perceptions of stress for the African American female participants due to racism and discrimination. The purpose of the study was to explore the social meanings of race and ethnicity within the experiences of discrimination due to racism in order to define the participants’ perceptions of racial stress and the role it plays on their health and lives (Hankin, 2006). The researcher created her own conceptual framework by using modifications from critical social theory and Lazarus’s theory of stress and coping. Critical social theory exposes oppressive features in society that hinder human health and potential, like racism, classism, sexism, or ageism (Hankin, 2006). Lazarus’s cognitive theory of stress and coping proposes that chronically stressful interactions with the social environment result in stress emotions and problems with emotional regulation, which lead to negative health changes within the body.

The next step is the person going through primary and, if needed, secondary appraisal, which is based on Lazarus’s cognitive theory of stress and coping. By going through primary appraisal, the individual determines if the incident is benign (ignore it) or a threat. If the person
determines that the incident is a threat, she goes through secondary appraisal in order to assess resources that are available to handle the incident. According to the framework, if sufficient resources are found, the individual is able to alter their environment. However, if there are no resources available, this can activate negative responses to the body that affect the immune and autonomic nervous systems and lead to somatic symptoms.

The sample population consisted of 21 women between the ages of 30-65 who self-identified as African American. All the women possessed at least a master’s degree, with income ranging from $50,000 to $150,000. Most of the women had a five- to ten-year history of hypertension, and most of them were in the overweight category according to their BMI score (Hankin, 2006). The unique descriptor about this sample population is that most of the women worked within the medical or healthcare field. The results from the study found that the women believed that their experiences as Black women presented challenges due to the way that White people or those in power perceived them. The women felt that these challenges and perceptions took away certain freedoms and respect. These challenges enhanced emotions of anger and frustration, which raised their blood pressure and contributed to poor management of their overall health because of the high levels of stress. The women stated that they continuously internalized feelings of anger and frustration due to the racism and discrimination that they faced, which caused them to develop negative health effects (Hankin, 2006). The participants also expressed emotions of feeling helpless and hopeless due to the racial discrimination that they experience. This study is extremely significant because the participants had excellent financial stability, health benefits, and knowledge about proper dieting and healthcare practices; however, they still suffered from hypertension and did not take proper care of themselves.
Even though some of the Black women in the previous studies were knowledgeable about certain health issues, many Black women lack the proper tools that are specifically tailored to their needs in order to maintain a healthier lifestyle. The next study is a comparison of three interventions with a purpose of increasing mammography screening among low-income African American women using the health belief model, transtheoretical model, and extended parallel process model (Champion et al., 2006). African American women were placed within the following intervention groups: targeted pamphlet only, culturally appropriate video, and interactive computer-assisted instruction program. Of the women who were placed in the computer program group, 40% showed a greater level of adherence to reporting having had a mammogram at six months post-intervention (Champion et al., 2006). More women in the pamphlet-only group (46.4%) showed more mammography readiness compared to the women in the video group (31.3%). However, when compared to the interactive computer group, the women in the computer group showed more progress toward mammography readiness (52%). A major strength of the intervention was that it used tailored messages that assisted individuals with overcoming their own barriers, which made the participants more responsive to the messages that were given in each intervention. This study is relevant because it also focuses on tailoring messages to African American women, and it received positive feedback.

Blackmon and Coyle (2017) conducted a study on racial-ethnic socialization and the mental health of Black undergraduate women and found that many of the women experienced marginalization-related stressors that interrupt the development and maintenance of what the authors call “flourishing,” which is related to a personal sense of success and self-esteem. Donovan and Guillory (2017) found that for marginalized groups such as Black women, being at the center of racial oppression matters in how Black women at predominantly White institutions
are treated, how they are perceived, and how they approach the classroom. These factors influence psychological and academic outcomes for Black women that influence their academic success.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical perspective that grounds my study is Black feminist thought (BFT), which can be used to define the vast experiences of Black women. It is said that even though the term “Black feminism” was made popular in the 1970s, it began in the nineteenth century during the anti-slavery movement (Longhofer & Winchester, 2012, as cited by Johnson, 2015). In response to some female anti-slavery groups not admitting Black women, northern free Black women created their own groups in order to fight against slavery, women’s rights, and racism. BFT does share similar tenants as critical race theory (CRT); however, it was the discrimination that Black women faced within the feminist movement and the sexism, oppression and subordination that they faced in the Black Power and civil rights movements that cause a definitive separation of the two. Black women needed a space to breathe, to discuss racism and sexism and how they have impacted their lives and minds, to validate their existence and define their own self-image. BFT provides a voice for every Black woman and acknowledges that every Black woman may not have the same experiences depending on class, religion, age and sexual orientation, but a Black woman’s perspective does exist.

BFT encompasses several tools that can/are still used today. BFT recognizes the ties between experience and consciousness and how it has an impact on Black women on an individual level and collectively (Johnson, 2015). As stated by Collins (2009), the realization of what we do and what we think will shape our lives and in turn filter through our work. BFT is also designed to promote action or activism among Black women that coincides with the thought
or premise that depending on the Black woman’s social location and experiences, her discussion or perspective on oppression will differ from the next. According to Johnson (2015), BFT consists of two types of knowledge: one being the type of knowledge that is often taken for granted that consists of the everyday thoughts and actions that are shared by Black women, and the second type of knowledge is the knowledge that is shared by Black female experts and specialists that come from different social and educational backgrounds. Within BFT, Collins (2000) used the “matrix of domination” to describe how oppression through race, gender, socioeconomic status, age and sexuality of Black women has been structured and organized to continuously oppress them; however, it has also increased the experiences and perspectives of Black women. According to Collins (2000), the continued effectiveness of Black women’s oppression is shown currently through the immense numbers of Black women in inner cities and rural areas who leave school early before attaining full literacy.

Collins (1986) used the term “outsider-within” to describe the makeup of Black women’s identity in society while also speaking about their experiences as Black women maintaining their position as outsiders within spaces of oppression. She used the example of Black women in domestic work and talked about even though they were given the opportunity to be around/work for the “elite” they were economically exploited by their White employers by receiving little pay while working long, hard hours. However, even though Black women are continuously marginalized, their position as outsiders-within provides a unique perspective on social, political, intellectual and economic realities that Black women face (Collins, 2002). I focused on this term while conducting the interviews with the participants in my research. Through self-definition, Collins (2002) stated that Black women are provided with the power to name their own reality. This power gives Black women the opportunity to tell their own stories, control images that are
perceived about them, and reject the dominant group’s definition of Black women. For Black women, being in control of their own stories and images is a key aspect to developing BFT. BFT is important because Black women are an oppressed group that needs an active response to the oppression that they face. BFT supports my argument by providing continuous evidence of the oppression of Black women and the impact it can potentially have on their mental and physical health as well as their education. It also provides a declaration that for the Black female perspective to be understood, it must be told or explained by Black women.

Theoretical Perspective

Transformative worldviews provide a framework that addresses issues of power, discrimination, and racism that is built on literature from critical and feminist theories. In the 1960’s, during the time of radical movements such as Black liberation and feminism, Black women felt that they had no place within either movement and they were not being heard. Hooks (1981) stated that Black women felt that they had to make a choice between the Black movement that mainly served the interests of Black men and the feminist movement, which primarily served the interests of White women. Angela Davis described the feminist movement as changing the position of women’s equality at the top of the social pyramid, beginning with middle-class White women, and leaving the lives of other women, specifically working-class Black women, untouched (Bryson, 2016). This meant that the Black female perspective was not being heard. Bryson (2016) stated that “feminist struggles cannot be confined to gender issues and that if black women’s perspectives are excluded from feminist thought, then its attempt to understand even the situation of white women will be seriously flawed” (p. 243).

During the 1980’s, many Black women felt that we needed our own theory that focused on our own experiences and forms of oppression. According to Hull, Scott, and Smith (1982),
Black women cannot exist until we begin to name ourselves. Therefore, I used Black feminist thought as part of my theoretical framework as well. Black women’s political and economic status offers experiences of reality from a different viewpoint that is not available to other groups of women or men. Based on the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1989), a subordinate group not only experiences a different reality, but they also interpret that reality in a different way from the dominant group.

BFT provides Black women with a tool of resistance to our various forms of subordination. It also provides a standpoint that is self-defined for Black women in order to resist their domination and allows for their voices to be heard. Most importantly, BFT allows Black women to provide their own viewpoints on how they should be received or viewed. Black feminists have consistently drawn attention to White society’s construction of Black women as hypersexual or desexualized beings that serve the interests White men and women (Young, 1996). However, these issues of racial privilege and subordination of Black women were never discussed within feminist theories. Through BFT, these issues are not only discussed, but also debunked through the telling of Black women’s experiences of oppression, subordination, identity and sexuality--by Black women.

There are several things that are accomplished by using Black feminist thought for my research. BFT acknowledges the voices of Black women and gives us the power to name our own reality and identity. When BFT is used, it creates a strong force that allows Black women’s voices to be amplified and addresses the issues of how Black women are perceived within society versus how we perceive ourselves, as well as the constant injustices and barriers that Black women have to face within society and our educational system. This theoretical framework will assist in answering my research questions pertaining to how educational
attainment impacts Black women’s health within a society that has neglected the Black women’s voice for decades. This theory also helps in answering the question of how society’s viewpoint and expectations of Black women, specifically educated Black women, are perceived through the eyes and voices of Black women and how that plays a role in how Black women practice self-care.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the epistemology of this project, followed by a discussion of the methodology and methods for the project. Next, I discuss how the data that I retrieved from my research was analyzed and the trustworthiness criteria. Finally, I will discuss my own positionality as it pertains to this project as well as the study’s limitations.

Epistemology

The design of my research is based on the transformative worldview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This type of design was chosen because it addresses discrimination, inequality, oppression, and suppression that many minority groups are faced with (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mertens, 2015). Transformative research assists with amplifying the voices of those who are not being heard by mainstream society. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), this worldview focuses on the needs of the marginalized or disenfranchised groups within society. Transformative worldview specifically focuses on social justice based on race and gender and an agenda for reform that changes the lens that certain minority groups are seen through. My research seeks to essentially change the way that Black women are viewed within the education system as well as within health disparities or issues.

The transformative view also focuses on knowledge that is derived from cultural lenses and the issues that are involved with determining what is deemed “legitimate knowledge” (Mertens, 2015). This means that the researcher develops (or already has) a relationship or
connection to the participants being studied that involves a level of consciousness toward the participants’ cultural complexities. As the researcher, I have a cultural connection to my participants because I am a Black woman, which allows me to not only see but understand my participants’ struggle with various levels of discrimination, oppression, and racism that they have faced within the education system and how that negatively impacts their health. I assume that this relationship will empower my participants by giving them the opportunity to tell their stories and provide knowledge and insight into a topic or issue that has been neglected and amplify the voice that they have not had within society.

**Methodology**

This project used a qualitative approach, specifically the methodology of narrative inquiry. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), the narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. They go on to describe narrative as a phenomenon and method that names structured quality of experience and patterns of inquiry for the study that it is being applied to. When using narrative inquiry, you are listening to the lived experiences of the participants and allowing them to develop a voice within the conversation. This leaves room for a researcher-participant relationship that Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state is important in the beginning stages of narrative inquiry. This does not mean that as the researcher I will lose voice or agency within the inquiry, however; it does mean that the participants will be given the proper time and space to tell their stories in order to gain authority over their own voice. This is important because the group focused upon here, Black women, have been historically silenced and have felt a constant need for their voices to be heard their way, on their terms.

The concepts and theories used within this research all focus on a major theme: marginalized (i.e., Black women’s) voices need to be heard within mainstream society in order to
progress. Delgado (1995) argues that the stories of people of color come from a different frame of reference. This special voice is different from the dominant culture and needs to be heard.

Cole (2017) goes on to say that the best way to understand racism is to both listen and learn about the experiences of those who are on the receiving end of racism. I think that the best way to listen and learn is through narrative inquiry.

Historically, African Americans have even used storytelling through slave narratives that discussed the harsh reality of the lives of slaves who were living on plantations (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001, p. 38). Banks-Wallace (2002) critiques dialogues about storytelling and “storytaking” and analyzes the process for gathering and interpreting stories rooted in African American oral tradition. According to Banks-Wallace (2002), storytelling enables African Americans to give their unique expression to their own experiences that can be passed down from generation to generation. The author goes on to say that the use of data collection methods that are grounded in oral tradition bridges the gap between participants and researchers. It also serves as a foundation for health promotion and behavior change.

Qualitative research methods could be enhanced if oral tradition were incorporated into the collection of data (Banks-Wallace, 2002). For healthcare researchers, this would be a better understanding of health, especially within the African American community. Stubbs (1995) stated that sharing stories allows African American women to be seen and healed mentally, spiritually, and physically. Banks-Wallace (2002) suggests that researchers create an environment that both maximizes data collection and provides a function for storytelling. In order to achieve this, the author suggests selecting a data collection procedure that allows for accurate recording of stories without minimizing the storytelling style. The author also suggests picking a site that ensures privacy for the participants and allows the proper amount of time for
participants to do culturally based storytelling. This article is related to my research because it discusses the importance of African Americans’ stories being told by them. Specifically, it focuses on the need for African American women telling their stories, their way, in order to heal within different avenues.

This method also allows the power dynamics between the researcher and participant to be equal, which in turn allows the participant to be more comfortable. For my project, I used a similar method of exchanging dialogue between myself and the participants within my study. I also wanted them to be able to speak openly/comfortably about their experiences, so that I can ensure that their voices would be heard within the narrative. According to Collins (1989), subordinate groups have always had to use alternative ways to create an independent consciousness that can be articulated through specialists that are validated by the oppressed. The data was collected with a semi-structured interview guide that allowed the women to answer in a narrative format (Aiken et al., 2001). This format allowed the participants to actively engage in the interview process and supported the cultural tradition of storytelling among Black women.

By using BFT within narrative inquiry, this allowed the participants of my study to feel comfortable with sharing their stories, experiences and everyday realities with me because it gave them the opportunity to articulate their stories the way that they wanted, under the premise that their voices and experiences would be heard by someone who understands the barriers that they have encountered. Zamudio, Russell, Rios and Bridgeman (2011) suggested encouraging the use of counter-narratives because it focuses on the voices of the oppressed. Counter-narratives help tell the “other side” and seek to change the status quo. It also focuses on social justice and challenges the dominant culture’s ideology regarding the marginalized people within society. In the text, Zamudio et al. (2011) go on to say that counter-narratives are stories that
help make sense of the world. My goal within my research is for others to understand the world of Black educated women, the barriers we face within society and the education system, and finally, how they impact our health.

**Participants**

For this project I interviewed 15 Black women in the Midwest. Eligibility to participate was self-identification as Black and female and also having a bachelor’s degree or higher, at least 25 years of age, and at least two years of work experience. This project involved purposeful sampling, which provides researchers the opportunity to gain data-rich, deep understanding of specific populations (Patton, 2015). Participants were recruited through flyers posted on Facebook, emails, and word of mouth.

**Methods**

For this project, there were two rounds of interviews with semi-structured, open-ended questions that helped answer my two research questions (Patton, 2015). The semi-structured interview process allowed the participants the space to open up and tell their stories the way that they wanted without being restricted to answering specific yes or no questions. Each interview ranged from 60-90 minutes long. I used a voice recorder while conducting the interviews with the participants. This gave me the opportunity to not only be an active listener and engage in more dialogue, if needed, with the participants, but also gave me the chance to go back and listen to the conversation in case I thought that there was something that I may have missed in the initial conversation. The interviews were transcribed verbatim.

In order to expand on the information that I received from the voice recordings, I also employed analytic memos (Saldana, 2009), where I wrote my own narrative about each interview. These memos focused on “body talk” within the interviews that I saw with the
participants. Voice recordings are good because you get to hear what the participants are saying; however, you do not get the opportunity to see how they respond to the questions. The analytic memos captured moments where I could describe how they physically responded to a question (i.e., fidgeting, looking away, smiling, emotional). According to Saldana (2009), your code process and code choices and the emergent patterns, themes and concepts within your data are reflected upon within the analytic memos. Within my memos, I talked about how I personally relate to the participants’ perspectives/responses within the interviews. According to Saldana (2009), this offered me the opportunity to establish a deeper connection with my interview participants.

**Data Analysis**

Interviews and memos were transcribed verbatim into narrative reports. During the process of analyzing the interviews, I “winnowed” the data in order to focus on certain themes that I noticed within the interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I used a combination of emerging and predetermined codes to code my data. I used first cycle coding to analyze the information I received from the interviews because it assisted with organizing raw data. Within first cycle coding, I utilized two subcategories: “elemental” and “affective” methods. Under elemental methods, I used descriptive, in vivo, and open coding. Descriptive coding describes characteristics of the data (Saldana, 2009). It is often seen as the first step in data analysis. I provided a descriptive label for each theme that I created from the interviews. In vivo coding applies the words of participants verbatim. Since the interviews were transcribed verbatim, the participants’ words could be taken verbatim from the transcriptions in order to examine themes and other categories that may have emerged from the data. Open coding takes an open-ended approach and codes “first impression” words and phrases and is seen as essential for first cycle
coding (Saldana, 2009). Open coding gave me the opportunity to remain open to all directions that the data may have gone. This was useful considering open-ended questions were utilized during the interviews. With open coding I was able to examine the similarities and differences of the responses that the participants gave within their interviews.

Affective methods give the opportunity to explore human experiences, which was important for this narrative inquiry because it helped with understanding the responses that the participants may have had to certain questions, which provided a deeper level of understanding of their stories. Within affective methods, I focused on emotion and value coding. Emotion coding labels emotions or feelings recalled by the participant or interpreted by the researcher (Saldana, 2009). Through the analytic memos, I was able to describe and label the participants’ direct emotions as well as what or how I thought that they interpreted/reacted to certain questions.

Finally, value coding focuses on collecting data that reflects the participants’ values, attitudes and beliefs pertaining to their view of a specific issue or topic (Saldana, 2009). With the voice recordings and analytic memos from the interviews, my goal was to be able to extract data on how they believe racism and discrimination have had an impact on their educational attainment as well as health. The narrative that I developed is therefore a representation of the themes and findings from the interviews.

**Trustworthiness Criteria**

There are several ways that trustworthiness was addressed within my study. One way that trustworthiness was addressed in my narrative study was that I used catalytic validity (Lather, 1986) to build upon the two themes of educational attainment and health. Catalytic validity focuses on a research study essentially empowering and liberating a research community. It gives
the participants the ability to push for social action and gives the researcher a deeper understanding of the participants (Lather, 1986). This ties in well with BFT because catalytic validity comes from a feminist perspective on giving participants a new level of consciousness or reality in order to transform it. (Lather, 1986; Sparkes, 2001). As I stated within my theoretical and conceptual frameworks, there are multiple barriers of racism and discrimination within the system that Black women face. These are real experiences that have shaped their lives that need to be heard.

In addition to providing evidence of the barriers that Black women face on an academic level, I also discuss how these barriers create certain levels of stressors that lead to other health concerns for Black women. I also employed a peer debriefer to review my entire dissertation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The debriefer provided an unbiased objective to my project throughout the process because she was not familiar with the research or with me. It also helped provide authenticity and accuracy to my work (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The advantage that I think that my research has is being able to shift the focus more toward Black women and the factors that impact our education and health. Since the beginning of time, we have been dealing with countless levels of discrimination and oppression without being heard.

**Positionality Statement**

When I think about it, Black women have always been placed into three categories/roles: the “mammy,” the “jezebel,” and the “sapphire.” The mammy was created during the post-Civil War era and was an asexual, grandmother-type figure whose sole purpose was to cater to the needs of a White family. The mammy is a good example of the “outsider-within” because she was “part of the family” only when deemed necessary by the dominant culture. When the members of the family needed her to do something for them or to get advice, she was always
there for them. However, once that need was fulfilled, she was no longer acknowledged. Then there is the jezebel, which is the hypersexualized Black woman who exhibits inappropriate behavior and has an insatiable sexual appetite. You will see this Black woman portrayed in countless music videos and all throughout the media. Finally, you have the sapphire, which is also labeled as the “angry Black woman.” This Black woman is verbally abusive, emasculating, loud, obnoxious, and most times angry.

Just three categories for literally millions of Black women. Looking at these options I have often wondered, “Where does that leave me?” My sole purpose in life is not to cater to the needs of others, I am more than some hypersexualized being, and even though I may be mad or disturbed by a few things that are going on in the world, I am not just another angry Black woman. I have multiple jobs, I am well educated, and I take care of myself, so where do I fit in? Over the years I have recognized an emerging category/role that I and my friends, who are also Black women have put ourselves into and that is the “Black superwoman” or “strong Black woman” category. The strong Black woman in a sense combats the previous categories that I just mentioned that the dominant group within society has placed on Black women. The strong Black woman is smart, beautiful, and can endure anything that is brought her way while still achieving what she wants.

When this role started to emerge, I was relieved. I felt that I can finally relate to something that is being presented that is so empowering. During this time when I am in school, I have felt that the educated Black woman finally has something that we could call our own. However, the older I got and the deeper I got into my education, on top of dealing with personal concerns and responsibilities, there were a few things that made me question my place within the strong Black woman role. There is always this sense of obligation to constantly present an image
of strength no matter what you are going through or dealing with. This ties into a perceived obligation to not show and suppress emotions, more specifically your own emotion, during difficult times. As a strong Black woman, you should not accept help from others because you should be capable of doing and handling it all. On top of handling everything, you must succeed at all costs, even with limited resources. Most importantly, you make sure that everyone else is taken care of around you.

When I first started the doctoral program, I was working four jobs and actively involved in multiple organizations. I also have my own apartment and I help take my mother around where she needs to go because she does not drive. I had not been enrolled in school for four years when I decided to go back for my doctorate. I enrolled in three classes. At the beginning of my first semester I quickly started to feel the stress of taking on multiple things. I considered letting go of one of my jobs, but I was quickly advised to keep pushing through because I “should be able to handle it.” With that being said, I was stressed, and looking back on it now, the one thing that brought me relief (exercise) I decided to let go because I did not have enough time to do all the other things I had going on plus study and write papers. I figured that I could get back to working out later because I had more important things to take care of. At the end of the semester I had 2 B’s and an A. Once again, I was told that I could have done better because I should have been able to handle it. I was extremely frustrated at the comment but at the same time, deep down I questioned whether I could have done better as well.

I have always been told to be the best, especially when it came to academics. I have dealt with multiple barriers throughout my life when it came to school, such as being labeled the “Black token” at a predominantly White grade school, being accused of “acting White” because I spoke proper English and got good grades in high school, or even during undergrad when I told
my advisor what I wanted to do and having her “suggest” that I do something a little easier. I pushed through all of that not because I had all the support that I needed, but because I felt that I didn’t have any other choice. As a strong Black woman that is what you do: you persevere during the difficult things in order to rise to the top. However, my goals to achieve academic success came at a cost, and that cost was my health. During my senior year of high school, I found out that I had an infected cyst in my back. I waited until the end of the my senior year to have surgery because I did not want to leave school, fall behind and have to go to summer school, which in my mind would have interrupted my plans of going to college in the fall because I would not have been able to use my academic scholarship and financial aid. At that early age I made the unconscious decision that education came before everything else because that was the only way I was going to be successful.

It was that mindset that to this day I still let sit in the back of my mind when it comes to taking care of self versus pushing through to achieve my academic goals so I can be successful in life. Part of this mindset is because I know that I have never had the same type of support that my other classmates had. I have heard the same story numerous times from other Black women who are “doing what they have to do” by any means in order to be successful. This is why my dissertation topic is so relevant to me. I wanted to be able to point out what has been placed in shadows for so long: how Black women have stopped taking care of themselves in order to achieve academic greatness. With my research, I want to be able to start that conversation by giving Black women a voice with which to talk about how achieving their educational goals has impacted their overall health and if it is a determining factor in the lifestyle choices that they make in regard to their health.
I am well positioned to lead this study because of my own experiences of barriers that I still encounter. I know that my own challenges I have faced are one of the reasons why I chose this topic. This serves as an asset to the project in that I know some of the experiences that my participants have experienced because I have dealt with them, too. This is also a benefit because it allowed the participants to be more open with me because we share a connection to the barriers within higher education.

**Limitations**

This research gives us the opportunity to be heard on an academic level that hopefully will have an impact within the field of health, as well. However, there are a few concerns that limit my study. The first is timeline. Due to time constraints there was not enough time to get all the data that I would have liked to retrieve from the study or the right number of participants. Another limitation was the number of participants in my study. There can be a lot of shortcomings/conflicts when it comes to recruitment due to the lack of time that the participants may have to sit down to do multiple interviews and the location as far as it being conducive to conducting an interview. Since there was no compensation for the interviews, there may have been reluctance from potential participants to sit down for an interview. A major concern or issue may be not having the research questions answered. This could have happened if the participants were not willing to provide personal information or other information that would be needed to help answer the research questions. I was able to avoid this limitation by providing a safe and comfortable place for the interviews to take place. The participants’ comfort level increased. I opened up my participant search to the Midwest region in order to find participants within several locations.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter focuses on the participants and the data that was collected from the interviews. A brief participant profile will be given about the 15 participants who were interviewed for the study. Several themes will be discussed that are relevant to the study and specifically the research questions. The themes that will be discussed are based on the participants’ responses during the interviews.

Participant Profiles

In an effort to better contextualize participants’ stories and voices, as well as provide information about participants, below I offer profiles of each of the women, offer some of their stories, and provide background information about each.

Carmen

Carmen has a bachelor’s degree in visual communications and is currently in graduate school for her master’s degree in digital marketing. She is 38 years old, a mother of four, and has been married for two years to her husband, whom she dated on and off for 15 years. She holds several jobs in human resources, marketing and communications, game operations, and administrative assistance.

Tammy

Tammy has an associate degree in business management, a bachelor’s in industrial technology, and a master’s in industrial management. She is 41 years old, a mother of four, a
grandmother, and has been married for 20 years. She currently works as an environmental health and safety manager.

**Jaleesa**

Jaleesa has a bachelor’s degree in sociology and a master’s degree in counseling. She is 39 years old and describes herself as a “co-parenting, single mother of two.” She currently works as a professional counselor at a university.

**Tamika**

Tamika received her bachelor’s in psychology and her master’s degree in clinical mental health counseling. She is 30 years old and a single mother of one son. She currently works as a mental health therapist with middle schoolers, doing group and individual counseling, and she also works in a private practice as well.

**Melanie**

Melanie is in her last semester of law school and she hopes she has only one more year in her MBA program. She is 29 years old and a mother of a five-year-old son. She is currently interning for a judge. She previously worked at several law firms but decided to take a break to focus on her studies and finish her programs.

**Trina**

Trina has her bachelor’s in psychology and is currently finishing up her master’s program for clinical mental health counseling. She is 32 years old, the mother of four children, and has been married for 10 years. She currently works as a research assistant and a behavioral health counselor.
Alexis

Alexis has a bachelor’s degree in rehab and disability services and a master’s in management information systems. She is 29 years old and a single mom of two. She currently works as a CDL driver and a production supervisor for a Fortune 500 company.

Karla

Karla has an associate degree in general studies, a bachelor’s degree in English, and is in her third year of her MA program in English with a focus in American literature. She is 36 years old. Karla currently works as an office manager for a resource center and is a teaching instructor as well.

Loraine

Loraine has a bachelor’s degree in family and individual studies. She has run a licensed daycare inside of her home for 22 years. Part of her licensure agreement is to complete 15 hours of continuing education every year, so she is always staying current with her education. She is 61 years old and has been divorced for three years, after 32 years of marriage. She has two adult daughters and three grandchildren.

Justine

Justine has her bachelor’s degree in elementary education from a historically Black College/University (HBCU) and her master’s in educational administration from a predominantly White institution (PWI) and is currently a doctoral student. She worked as a teacher for eight years and a principal for 11 years. Justine is 41 years old and describes herself as a wife, a mother, a veteran of the United States Army, and a principal of an elementary school.
Kimberley

Kimberley received her associate degree in economics, her bachelor’s degree in behavioral science, and her master’s in healthcare administration. She also completed her LPN and currently works as a nurse manager. She is 54 years old, has three children, and has been married for 30 years.

Olivia

Olivia has a bachelor’s in family nutrition and a master’s in adult education. She is 63 years old, the mother of two adult children, and has been divorced and remarried. She has been married to her current husband for 31 years. She is currently retired, but before she retired, she worked at the telephone company, at DCFS, and finally at the IT desk of a university.

Michelle

Michelle received her bachelor’s in textiles, apparel, and merchandising. She is 33 years old and currently works as a general manager at a hotel. She originally wanted to be a buyer for a major fashion company, but lost interest within the field.

Sasha

Sasha has a bachelor’s degree in nutrition dietetics and a master’s in public policy. She is 34 years old. She is licensed as a registered dietetic technician. She currently works as a community programs coordinator where she does community outreach and works directly with the community to address food access issues within Chicago.

Vanessa

Vanessa has a bachelor’s degree in community health and a master’s degree in public health. She is a 36-year-old single mother of a two-and-a-half-year-old. She is a member of a
predominantly Black sorority, and she currently works as a contractor for public transportation services in a large city within the Midwest, where she manages their corporate wellness.

**Racial Identity and Terminology**

When it came to racial identity, participants offered a variety of answers regarding the terms they identified with and the importance those terms played within their identity. Interestingly, as participants shared, it became clear that while some used terms interchangeably, others felt strongly about using one identity term due to their personal beliefs. There were some who used the terms *African American* and *Black* interchangeably. For example, Justine uses both terms, and when I asked her why, she stated:

> Because I think there's a pride in both. I mean, I'm Black, which that word for me is a word of pride. But when you are in the professional setting or other settings, a lot of people will say African American. So just I identify as both.

Melanie also stated that she uses both terms as well:

> I use them interchangeably because I know some people take offense to like the African, like, “Oh, you're not African American” but we are African descent in America. That’s why I'll say African American and then I'm Black. I'm a Black person so it doesn't bother me. And none of them. Neither one of them are, like offensive to me.

> There were some who will identify as both but will ultimately choose one over the other.

For example, Kimberley identifies as both, but goes on to say:

> I identify with ... both. If I were to choose, I would say Black because of the fact that I have not researched my heritage ... would make me say that I don't identify with that as much because I just don't know the history. Then as a Black individual, I think I identify more with that because, one, my age, and I have experienced things living in America, living as a Black woman in America.

Jaleesa and Tamika had similar responses as well. Jaleesa said:

> I actually identify as both. Typically, I usually say Black people. I am Black. I refer to other people as Black people. But more so African American if it needs to be written or if I'm checking off a box. But I typically identify as a Black person.
Tamika simply said, “Black. I mean if it’s on a [sic] application it’s African American. I just put that… realistically, because I don’t think I’m African.” Both Jaleesa and Tamika seemed to be okay with identifying and/or being identified as African American or Black. However, they prefer to identify as Black due to their lack of knowledge about their African lineage.

There were some who were very adamant about strictly identifying as only Black or only African American. For example, Loraine preferred to be addressed only as African American because, as she stated:

This is really a sensitive issue with my family members. I identify as African American because I'm very, very proud of the lineage in which I come from, Africa. My daughters have told me that's old-school terminology, but just to say I'm Black, to me, denies my ancestry, and I think that that's important.

Carmen will only identify as Black and has some very strong views about why she does not like “African American.” She stated:

I despise “African American.” I don't like it. I think it's... Actually, I had this conversation with a colleague. He said, "Well, I use the term African American." I said, "Well, what are you?" He said, "I'm White." I said, "You're not Caucasian?" He said that for him... he's an older guy, but using the term African American was more... If you used the term Black or colored, he viewed that as more negative than African American. I said, "Well, for somebody like my husband, you will try and classify him as African American because he's legit from Africa and now he's here in America, but for me, I'm not from Africa by way of I wasn't born there. I'm American, but you're trying to classify me as this... Which is like, "We're still trying to tie you back to the roots." I don't know where the fuck the word came from in general, which is why I say I also don't like “persons of color” because I also think people, persons of color takes away from Blacks… I despise “African American.” I would say, "I just say Black." Do not call me African American.

Karla viewed African American as a “passivist term” and Black has been more “militant” throughout history. She went on to describe “African American” saying:

I think when we were wanting to be more integrationist or when the people who coined that term were moving towards integration and Black was like Black Power, Black is beautiful. It was the more militant. That's what I identify with it.
Given these participants’ experiences with racial identity, their experiences with different terms and terminology, I have worked to honor these participants’ identities and the terminology they most identify with throughout this dissertation. Thus, as I refer to each participant, terms may differ from one to another. This is to honor their identities, voices, and lived experiences.

**Findings**

After data was collected and coded, five themes emerged from the data. These themes are “push through it,” “endure,” or “deal with it”; loneliness and lack of support; microaggressions; the representative; and self-care: “pray about it.” The phrases “push through it,” “endure,” and “deal with it” came up several times when the participants described ways that they dealt with stress, racism and discrimination. The theme of loneliness and lack of support emerged as the participants discussed their experiences within higher education. Examples of microaggressions were provided by the participants throughout their interviews. When asked about how they focused on self-care, particularly in the realm of mental and physical health, most of the participants talked about being given the advice to “pray about it” and how that impacted their overall health. In the following sections, each of the five findings are presented along with participant voices and quotations.

**“Push through it,” “Endure,” or “Deal with it”**

As participants were interviewed, they shared common phrases that emerged within their transcripts. Common throughout their interviews were phrases such as, “push through it,” “endure,” and “deal with it.” Interestingly, these phrases emerged when the women discussed how they dealt with stress, racist and discriminatory experiences while in college, as well as feelings of loneliness and depression. For example, when asked what resources she used to take care of her health while she was in school, Carmen said “Put my head down and pushed through
it, no resources other than my internal drive. And maybe it was because I didn’t know there were some.” So, when Carmen used the phrase “push through it,” she discussed how she had to deal with issues on her own, specifically when it came to levels of stress. She felt that there was no outlet for her within the university that she was attending, and she could not get the support that she truly needed anywhere else.

When talking about how to deal with health issues while in school, Alexis said:

Even if I was in pain or if there was a barrier, I still try to push through it. If there was any like my health or say I'm not feeling well, I'm sick or I have the flu, I still would try to get up and go to school, or I don't let that kind of thing stop me.

Here, Alexis is talking about how she deals with or takes care of her health. For her, it did not matter if she was tired or even in physical pain, she felt that she could not stop doing what she felt that she needed to do to become successful, even if that meant ignoring the pain that she was in.

Trina discussed the high levels of stress that she experiences from school when she shared:

The amount of stress that I feel like I endure is troubling to me sometimes. Sometimes I got to call my mama, to talk to her, because I feel like I'm going to have a panic attack. I always feel like something is looming over my head and it's not just homework.

The stress that Trina described came from experiences that she dealt with inside of the classroom as well as on the campus of her university. The racist and discriminatory behavior that she dealt with from her peers as well as her professors caused high amounts of stress for her. The safest outlets that she had came from her family because she felt like she could not trust anyone on her campus to talk to about her problems.
Sasha talked about a past situation dealing with her classmates and a group project and how they repeatedly ignored her input on a project. When asked how she felt about the experience and what she did, she said:

Even though I was hurt by it I felt like I had to endure it because at the end of the day the world isn't all Black. And honestly, I knew even then that I was going to deal with a lot more issues of White people and their, what do you call that? Their, um, their um, perceptions of us and our abilities. I really felt like they didn't want me in a group with them. They had to deal with me because I was in class.

Similar to the sentiments of Trina, Sasha felt as though she had no one on campus during the time that she was in college to talk to about the negative experiences that she faced within the classroom. In a sense, she felt like she had to deal with it because it was preparing her for the world beyond college. She knew that she would have other experiences once she entered the work field.

For example, when talking more about the subject of dealing with experiences of racism and discrimination even now at work, Sasha said that:

You got to try to keep your cool, especially in these spaces, because you know where you're trying to get to, and this is only a temporary moment in time. I'm always tolerating it. I don't know. I feel like as a Black woman in White culture, if you respond too much, you make them feel nervous and threatened. On the other hand, you have to watch your language, too, your response, because you need to. You're trying to navigate their world.

Here, Sasha felt she had to essentially “check herself” when dealing with racism or discrimination at work because even though she was the one receiving the negative comments or experiences, she had to be mindful of her tone and how she responded to these negative experiences so her White counterparts did not feel threatened or even label her as an “angry Black woman.” She knew that she wanted to achieve more, and she felt like the only way to do that was “endure” the negativity to get to where she wants to be in the future.
Some of the participants went on to say “enduring” or “pushing through” was something that they were taught. For instance, Tamika said:

Women are kind of taught like “you got to be strong,” “you have to just keep going no matter what's going on.” Like, “you got to keep pushing.” It happens amongst Black women, especially if like family is predominantly made up of women. You'll see like grandma then you know, carry the weight of her kids despite if she's married or not. The expectations that are placed upon I think a Black woman is where it's “I can't show you weakness cause weakness or vulnerability is weak.” I have to like, keep going, keep pushing, although I'm like killing myself on the inside.

Here, in addition to race, Tamika was talking about gender, specifically the matriarchy within Black culture. Black women often have the weight of the world on their shoulders, but because of stereotypical perceptions of the strength of Black women, we are told or feel like we have to deal with the pain, the stress and the exhaustion. To do anything else can be perceived to be a sign of weakness, and you cannot take care of your family if you are weak.

Trina had a similar response when she shared:

I was also taught not to dwell on stuff because it really don't help. You got to get up and keep going because what else are you going to do? Because if I don't, then what's the alternative? In my head, there is no alternative.

Just as Trina discussed here, these women felt that they had to “endure” and “push through” because not only was that the sole reason they would succeed, they felt they had little other choice. Moreover, it was expected of them.

Overall, the participants talked about similar situations of stress (both mental and physical), racism, discrimination, and how they deal with it. In a sense, they had to suppress their feelings to not be perceived in a negative manner by White patriarchal society and to not seem “weak” within their Black culture. All the participants felt a lack of support from their higher educational institutions to discuss their feelings, which will be discussed further within the next theme.
Loneliness and Lack of Support

Within their interviews, each of the participants expressed a lack of support from their higher educational institutions that made them feel as if they were alone in navigating their college career. The counselors, professors, peers, and for a few, their families provided no outlet for the participants to express how they felt nor gave them the proper tools and resources to handle being in a new academic environment and cultural setting. This sense of loneliness or lack of support created higher levels of stress and essentially impacted their mental and physical well-being.

Tamika talked about her first year at her university. The lack of support she received from her family helped her make the choice to get involved with the mentoring program when she became an upperclassman. She said:

I knew people but I didn't have someone so much that was older that could show me kind of the ins and outs of college living, especially with being from under my parents, first-generation college graduate. [pause] Well, a college student. I couldn't get that experience or pep [sic] talk before coming as to what to expect.

Tamika felt as though she had to learn about the college experience on her own because no one in her family had gone to college. She knew what it felt like to navigate the college experience on her own and how stressful it was, which is why she made the decision to be a mentor to incoming freshmen, especially to those students with similar backgrounds as her own.

Olivia came to college in the 1970s at the age of 16. She felt that she “grew up at the university” because she was so young when she started. She looked at her young age as a barrier and she felt:

Part of the barrier was being out here in the middle of the country with people that didn't look like me. But it was just the culture shock. It was a cultural barrier that nobody really treated me mean, or anything like that, or gave me the impression that I couldn't, but I just didn't feel like anybody cared. Seeing people like my roommate, her mom and dad
would come up and take her out. I always felt like alone, and there was nobody to kind of catch me. When I was home and in school, I mean, my mom, she was on us. And so, it was like it was too much. I couldn't find stockings or any lip colors that were appropriate for me in the local area. The food in the hall was not, like, I wanted some beans and rice. I'm not a big meat eater, but I like beans. It was very awkward. It was hard to acclimate.

One of the things that Olivia wished she had been able to do was learn how to deal with large lecture halls. As she stated:

I was used to that kind of personal thing and this was a large school. And without having some of the social skills, and not really being prepared for being this anonymous person in this classroom, I didn't feel as attached and things.

She became extremely isolated and as a result she said that it “impacted my ability to experience college at a level at which is kind of the dream or vision of being in college, for you to grow and become a woman.” She also felt that “that feeling of being isolated and alone led me to hold onto something, even though it wasn't a healthy relationship.” When I asked her if she felt that her lack of support and isolation had an impact on her health, she said:

Mental health in the aspect of me questioning, like feeling like I'm not good enough. I'm questioning whether I can be successful, not believing that I could be. So I didn't try as hard or focus as much because of the social aspects of leaving home, living among strangers and people, and no one has a specific interest in you. Just like feeling alone a lot. I mean, I would say looking back at it that there would have been times where I felt depressed. Just mental health-less. I didn't feel good about who I was or where I'm at. I'm just here and I've got to hang on.

For Olivia, being in a place where you would ideally be growing and maturing into adulthood was too much for her to deal with at 16. She found herself alone and isolated by peers and the overall college experience because she was so young. Because she could not grasp the concept of being in big lecture halls, living in a dorm and being away from a tight-knit support system, she began to question herself and her ability to be a college student. She felt like an imposter, who was trying to fit in with people whom she thought she could not identify with. The university did
not provide her with any type of support system or resources, which made her eventually hold onto unhealthy relationships so that she did not feel alone.

When she first entered college, Jaleesa said that she felt “that nurturing part that I was used to wasn't there in the beginning.” She went on to say that:

I mean it was just different in the sense of adjusting to being on your own. Not really having a lot of, I guess ... my experience in middle school, high school, having a lot of teachers that you just knew, that were there, that you know you could talk to. I guess it was in the beginning building those relationships with people and making sure you had those people to really be there for you. You have to kind of develop those things on your own when you come to a college campus, which, honestly, I feel like as a student when I was a student, if you didn't know how to do that, if you now had instructors or professors that didn't look like you, I don't know how easy that was at the time for me.

Going back to that nurturing aspect that she was missing in college, Jaleesa talked about a time when she was struggling in math. She said that she felt defeated because she had never struggled in math, and when she went to her advisor, her only advice was to change her major. She was a little disappointed because, as she said, “It wasn't like, ‘Oh, let me help you.’ It was just like, ‘Well, this is your other option.”’

Carmen spoke about the lack of support that she gets from her family, specifically her husband, when it comes to her going to graduate school. This is the situation that she described:

Um, I think me and my husband have had a “don't ask, don't tell” about school. He is smart but school's not his thing. He has the, probably how I feel about babies is how he feels about people in school, where he kind of gets jealous that everyone's graduating, or like when all his high school friends graduated he was kind of upset, but he doesn't have the drive to go finish or do whatever. Um, he did not attend my graduation from community college. Um, he did attend my graduation from the university... Um, my husband was inspired by me going back to school but he, so he tried to enroll at the university and his application was denied, and so now I'm somewhat in the boat where I feel like I need to tiptoe again, talking about school.

When I asked Carmen how that made her feel, knowing that she had to tiptoe around talking about being in school, she said, “On one hand it’s, I get it, and I then, I don’t. No, I don’t.”
Carmen also spoke about the lack of support students receive about mental health on campus. She felt that there were few or no resources available when she experienced the loss of her unborn baby the semester before her graduation. I asked further about resources on campus pertaining to mental health, and she shared that the institution had...

None. They don't talk about mental health in school. I, I mean they do but they don't. They talk about like, “take a break and come play with the dogs” during finals week. It's supposed to be like stress relief. But that's not actually dealing with, that's that you have a difficult professor that you feel like is targeting you for whatever reason, petting a dog ain't going to fix that. [sarcastic laugh] So I, ..., no, there's no, they don't talk about it. When I had my crisis, the advisor told me take a year off. That was, I don't know if that's a, considered a resource or not but, no. It was, no.

Carmen did not feel that the little support that her graduate school provided for her was impactful enough in regard to her mental health. The one time that she did receive some form of advice, it was to simply leave school, which is not what Carmen really wanted to do. She would have preferred more concrete resources or help such as actually talking to someone who could give better resources and advice besides just giving up and leaving school.

Carmen also spoke about the lack of support she currently feels now that she is in graduate school. She has a sense of loneliness or disconnect that makes her consider stopping the program or taking a break. She shared:

As a graduate student you're just in this, this adult group of, you're a grad student. I mean, do ..., “you're smart enough to figure this out.” You're, you should be well trained to go, “go off and just do what I'm telling you” without a lot of direction or guidance. Um, I don't think they take into account still the nontraditional component of it, is that graduate does not mean I'm 24. I think I'm struggling with it more now because I have an online class and there's not a lot of interaction. I'm just in this program, and I can talk to my manager who's ahead of me. She's not dealing with it with me. Other than that, it's names and an email thread. There's no connection of, "Hey, are you struggling too? I'm struggling. Can we work on this together?" I think that mental capacity when you're looking at the push that needs you to keep going, I'd be less likely if I had a on-track buddy with me to keep going and not maybe take semester breaks.
Carmen provided a perspective from the nontraditional student about the lack of support that she felt because she was not able to communicate with anyone face to face. Even though she is a graduate student, she still needs the proper attention and support from her university to keep her involved in school. Without the proper support from even her peers, she felt alone and no one is there to help motivate her to stay in school.

Sasha also had a similar experience in graduate school. She said:

I would definitely say with grad school, you don't necessarily get help, you just expect, just go out there and be an expert… You feel like you were just on an unknown journey with no real structure and no real explanations and you not really knowing whether or not you’re actually competent.

Similar to the struggles of Carmen, Sasha felt that she did not receive the proper guidance to navigate through graduate school properly. She felt that there was an assumption that she already knew certain things pertaining to her major, so nothing was ever discussed between her and her professors or advisors. This caused a lot of doubt for Sasha regarding her capabilities to be a successful student and professional.

Alexis described her graduate school experience as feeling like an “outsider.” She continued to describe how she felt during that time when she shared:

For me, it kind of got to the point where I was just like, "I don't even want to go to this class. I'm in here staring at the walls." I feel I walk into class and I'm the only African American in there and that I'm an African American female. But the only thing that kept me going was my children. But I was just like, yeah. I would reach out to professors and like, "I'm not understanding this," and some was like, "Oh, well." Well, two in particular said, "Oh, you should know this." I was just like, "I don't know this," so I just had to deal with it and just get through.

For Alexis, she experienced a lack of support that affected her so much, that she did not want to attend class anymore.
In addition, Alexis said that she felt the same way even during her undergraduate career when she moved close to the campus of her university with her small child. She said:

From the first day on campus, mind you, I had just moved all the way from Chicago. I had only been down here a couple of weeks, family is back at home and I'm looking for resources, I'm trying to get everything set up and, and I was just like, "It's very limited." I remember walking, I think it was the semester we had the really bad blizzard, but I remember walking in a blizzard and I was just like, "It is very limited. The resources I don't feel is a lot of stuff out here for the nontraditional students. Everything is geared for the traditional students. Give me some resources that I can use. I'm a college student trying to work two jobs on top of trying to make rent. Then you have daycare on campus that's $300 or something." It was very expensive. It was resources that I felt it didn't do no good for me.

Just like Carmen, Alexis is speaking from the viewpoint of the nontraditional student. She was struggling with finding resources on campus as well as trying to keep a roof over her and her child’s head and paying for daycare services so that she could go to school. She felt like an outsider because she felt like her university was so focused on the traditional student who does not have children and does not have to worry about the same things that she had to.

Kimberley felt the same way as a nontraditional student regarding her school’s support. Kimberley offered:

I had to jump through a lot of hoops. I had to get my family in order, get my household in order. At that time when I was doing my bachelor's, they were not as lenient or understanding of what I had to do, so it took me a little bit longer to do my undergrad.

Kimberley felt as though there was a disconnect between her being a nontraditional student and the amount of support that she received from the university that she attended. She did not want things to be easier for her because she had a family. However, she would have appreciated more support and understanding from the school that she attended. Because of this lack of support, it took her longer to get her bachelor’s degree.
Tammy enjoyed her time in the community college; however, once she transferred into her university, she felt lost with no support. She stated:

It was a different experience just because, again, I didn't know many people here, and it wasn't as helpful. If I would've known about the programs that they had, if I came in through a different way, I think it wouldn't have been so much of a struggle, but I didn't know anything. So, because I didn't have the resources, it was frustrating. But even the financial aid aspect of it was frustrating being a single mother and trying to work and go to school and then not getting assistance.

Once again, as a nontraditional student and a single mother, Tammy felt like she did not receive the proper amount of support from her college. She had no guidance to get the resources or information that she needed to thrive within the university setting.

Financial struggles were a major hardship for Justine, as well, so much so that she stated that she felt that was the start of her anxiety and depression. She stated:

So, there was a point in time in college where I was homeless because my parents had separated and were unable to financially assist me with school anymore and I didn't have a place to live coming back. So just figuring out money for school so that I could continue my education, which is another reason why I graduated a year later, because I had to figure out money and a place to live once I returned to Illinois. I think that was really the start of some of my anxiety and depression that I had because I had never experienced that before. And I think just some feelings of rejection. Definitely, “Where am I going to live when I come home? How am I going to pay for school? I’m almost done.” So, I think that put a lot of stress on me that I hadn't anticipated would happen when I first started school.

In this situation, Justine did not receive the financial support that she greatly needed from her family, nor from her institution. Because she did not receive the proper support, she became homeless while still struggling to figure out how to finish school. This was a situation that Justine was not prepared for, which led her to experiencing high levels of stress that led to depression.

Justine also felt a lack of support during graduate school. She talked about a specific experience she had with a professor when she offered:
Yeah. During my master’s, I had a professor who didn't show up to class, didn't answer my questions. And when I felt like I didn't understand something, I felt belittled and rejected. Why didn't I understand this? Why didn't you read it? And that was the only class that I got a B in, in my master’s, which is still a good grade, but it was at that point where I was like, I don't know this and this person is not trying to help me. And I think that was the first real struggle I had. And that was during my master’s, just not feeling like I knew what was going on and the teacher not being helpful.

Justine’s lack of support and guidance from her professor caused a lot of self-doubt and stress for her. Not only did she struggle in the class, but she felt rejected by the professor, which impacted her learning experience in the classroom.

Karla talked about the loneliness and isolation that she felt when she transferred from her community college in a large racially diverse city in the Midwest to a predominantly White institution. She said about the beginning of her academic career at the university:

I really didn't have a social life here. I still don't. It's better now. Once I got a job working with other professionals, then I started meeting people and we'd go out to dinner or go out and have a drink or whatever. But I don't really count that as a social life. I felt swallowed up by the fact that I was the only Black person in the program, in all of my classes, none of the content was catered to me. I was the only Black person in the class. It became a little bit overwhelming until I had to [pause] I mentally checked out and then I had to remind myself it's bigger than that. And so how does a person of color, how do they operate in that? What makes them want to be successful in something like that where they can't see themselves. I think that being able to see yourself in your field of study is really important. And to me that's where racism has come in the most because even though they try to make changes, both to the canon and in terms of the university, the administration, they only have maybe, maybe three instructors, professors of color. But I had to create some tactics or some strategies to kind of psych myself out to make it okay to sit in these classes and just feel not... I think like W. E. B. Du Bois' double consciousness. It comes into play because you feel separate, you feel [pause] I felt isolated. I felt like I was the only one, right? And so then I started believing that they didn't understand, people didn't understand. It made me to think of myself both as a student and a Black student. And that's where it became difficult. I feel like I started having to work double time or overtime and I didn't have any outlets to express my racial concerns. I didn't have any outlets to express my racial identity because it wasn't racism. It's not racism over there, but it feels [pause] I felt like my race was the prominent thing that everybody saw about me and I felt like I had to pit my race against everything that we were learning.
Here, Karla spoke on several things that impacted her learning experience. The fact that she was the only Black woman in her classes made her feel lonely and added to her level of stress. Karla also acknowledged that there was a lack of diversity in her curriculum and within her university as a whole, which causes her even more stress. She also spoke on the level of double consciousness that causes her to feel isolated because she feels as though there is no one in her class or program who understands how she feels. She began to question her role or purpose as a student because she could not express herself the way that her classmates could, and she could not identify with anyone in the classroom. Karla began to feel a sense of hopelessness that she did not know how to address.

Eventually, that feeling of loneliness and isolation went away for Karla during her undergraduate career. However, she found herself in the same situation as before when she started in her graduate program. This time, it felt even worse. She shared:

And just the further up you go in the program, there are not a lot of Black and brown people who are majoring in English, and in graduate school there are hardly any. And so when you don't see yourself in your field, in the history by and large, and you don't see yourself in your department, and you don't see yourself in the classroom, well, that to me that becomes a compounding situation. It becomes really complex. And in that way, that's how racism affected my higher education experience. It was just, there were too many voids where I wasn't. And I mean my identity, my people, my history and where it was, it was being told by somebody else's voice. And that just really made me angry. Graduate school functions differently than undergrad and I wasn't even aware that there was going to be a shift or a culture shock. And so that kind of stunted me and I kind of lost everybody else that I was in undergrad with. They graduated and they left. So I didn't have the little support, that idea field. I didn't have it anymore. My cousin graduated and she left as well. So then I began living on my own and then it kind of was like isolation and that I didn't do good in that. It set me back and I had to figure out that there was a problem and then kind of work back from that.

Going into graduate school, Karla felt a major shift because the small support group that she had during her undergraduate career diminished. She felt that she was on her own and alone again.
She felt that she had no voice because the program and specifically the curriculum in graduate school were worse in regard to the lack of representation of Blacks and women of color.

Karla also explained an experience that she had with a professor during graduate school that added to her feelings of loneliness and isolation. She said:

My first year of graduate school I took a class with a professor that I had already had four times as a part of the undergrad. This is my favorite professor. So it was a no brainer for me to take her class when I saw it. And the class was so [pause] the way that she ran the graduate school class was so vastly different from the way that she was running the undergraduate classes. I couldn't even believe it and I started feeling like I couldn't keep up… I would try to reach out, I reached out twice to this professor to help me and she assured me both times that it was nothing the matter. I just tried to express to her… that I felt like something wasn't going right in the class or I felt like that I wasn't grasping the information in the class or that I wasn't [pause] There was a disconnect in the class and I didn't feel like I was producing, right? And this is coming off of, again, knowing her for over the course of two years, essentially, that she got to know my work that she got to know my style… But she had stopped even calling on me. When I would try to raise my hand in class, she wouldn't even call on me anymore.

I asked Karla how that made her feel knowing that she originally thought that she had a connection with that professor, she reached out to her and essentially was ignored, and she shared:

I started to feel like I wasn't smart enough. I wasn't good in it. You know, like that imposter syndrome. That's when I first even learned what the imposter syndrome was, when I started to talk about it. It made me feel invisible. It made me really, really angry. It made me feel like it wasn't even worth it. Like the class wasn't worth it, like my effort in the class wasn't worth it. It made me feel invisible, it also made me angry that she didn't recognize that, that she didn't want to come, like, “Hey, what's it like? What's up? What is going on?” That made me angry and then it made me even more angry when I had to rationalize with myself that that's [long pause] that what I'm thinking about would have been nice, but that she didn't have to do that. I expected more from her, someone that I had given a great deal of my creativity, my vulnerability, my time, my effort to, and who has seemed really receptive to it? Yes, I had higher expectations but she did not fulfill them and that made me angry.

Karla addressed her expectations that she had for her professor and how she felt when her professor did not meet those expectations. More importantly, she addressed feeling like an
imposter because her confidence level in her work and ability as a graduate student had been diminished when her needs were not being met within the classroom. She felt vulnerable because she had given so much to this particular professor and in return she is ignored.

I asked Karla if she thought that her experiences had any impact on her health, and she shared:

I started getting sicker more often, like common cold type things more often. And I know it was because my immune system was weakened because I was stressed out and staying up late and stuff like that. And just stress is a killer. Mentally, I was depressed. And I didn't feel like anybody understood it, where they should've been understanding it, which was in my department, in my program, because they don't have to go through that because they're not Black. And I just really do feel like, and I've never asked, not even one of them, but I don't think that they're thinking about their race because they don't have to, because they're not a minority.

Karla went through several phases within her college career and her years in graduate school. She has felt isolated and ignored by her department. She was under tremendous amounts of stress but was not able to go to anyone within her department because she had no one who could relate to her or her experiences, not just as a Black student, but also as a Black woman within a White society, which, for her, is dominated by men. These stressors created issues within her mental and physical health that have yet to be addressed.

Loraine attributes the lack of support that she and so many other African Americans, specifically African American women students, receive to how we are perceived by society. She stated:

I still think that, with being a minority, be it you look at me as African American or a woman, I think the expectation is always low for us, thinking that we can't achieve and that we're not capable. No matter how many degrees you have, there's going to be someone you encounter, whether it be in the professional field or while you're on your educational journey, is going to think, "Oh, you don't really have what it takes." And that's sad, that that thought process is still there. We constantly have to prove ourselves.
Lorraine talked about an experience she had in statistics that she really struggled in and the perceived expectation. She offered:

My one C [laughed loudly], it would be in that class because it was so foreign to me. For me, I will admit, it was a blow to my ego, because math had always been one of my strengths. So, I did well in the statistical part of it, but probability was something I never [long pause] I'm going to be honest with you. I reached out to TAs who were all foreign students, and I just couldn't get help from them because there were some language barriers there. I really had to kind of do this the best that [pause] I really had to kind of, through some peers, and just keep trying until I grasp it on my own. Like I said, I got a C. I passed, but it just still was not up to my standard of performance. I struggled. I really struggled.

I asked Loraine if there had been any follow-up or assistance from the professor even after she reached out to him, and she said, “Nope. I think once again that expectation bar was low. ‘She’s passing.’ It didn’t matter. I wasn’t failing the class. I was passing the class.”

Lorraine felt that the professor did not do any follow-up with her because his perception of her as an African American student was already set to a low standard. So there was no need to check in with her because she was getting a C, which in her mind was what the professor expected her to get, if not lower.

Sasha described her entrance into her university during undergrad as a freshman as “not very welcoming” and that, “just going to see counselors, you didn't feel like they were on your team. You felt like they would often give you a recommendation that you felt [was] based on their own misconceptions of Black people specifically.” She went on to talk about specific experiences that she had with an advisor and then with a professor. Sasha said:

For the most part I was pretty much an A, B student. Um, for my, was it my junior year? I was taking biochemistry. The professor was not very good. His teaching methodologies [were] very different from how I had studied. I couldn't get beyond a "D" on the exam. I wound up going to my advisor at the time. I was really upset, really sad. She was like, "I don't mean this you know, in the wrong way, but have you ever been tested to see um, if you needed special education?" I was like, "Special education?" [pause] "Yeah, I've had family members that found out later in life they needed special education." I said, "One
'D' and you want to ask me if I need special education?"… This is the person who is supposed to help you to, you know, schedule your classes and help you to do what needs to be done to finish. Just in that specific instance of being asked about special education when you are down there, taking the same course work that other peers and counterparts are doing the same thing, you wonder. For me, I feel like if I wasn't Black or whatever, would you have asked me that question? I would definitely, maybe I would have felt inclined if I had a track record for, for not being able to pass classes. My very first class I do not pass, you ask me if I need special education? I felt like it was a slap in my face.

She went on to describe another experience with a professor within her major field of study. She said that it was in a 400-level course and she went to the professor for help. She shared:

I think I was struggling and I had questions. She pretty much asked me why don't I switch my major. Um and I'm like it's the only class I failed of yours. Why would you ask me if I would switch my major? If I'm struggling in the class “clearly” I may want to consider changing my major. That is the last time I will ask you for help. You know and, in my mind, my mind said, "I'll show you."… She wound up linking me up with someone else who was, who was in my class with me. I feel like she [the professor] didn't want to deal with me.

Sasha went on to talk about another situation where she asked the chair of her department for assistance on two separate occasions: once for a recommendation letter for a job and another time for a recommendation letter for graduate school, and this is the situation and response she said she had gotten:

So, in order to get this job, I had to go to a former professor in order to get a recommendation. I emailed the professor. I had taken three, maybe four classes with her. All of them had been Bs… told me that pretty much that she thinks that part of my work was probably on the cusp of a C. And so she was not going to give me a recommendation. And I was like, I worked my ass off in your class. Are you doing this because I am Black or because you dislike me?... I had asked her for a recommendation for graduate school and I never submitted those recommendations. I opened those recommendations up and she writes in the recommendation that “I can probably focus on school if I didn't let my family life interfere with my school, interfere with my studies.” And I was like, “This is my recommendation to get into a school, and you basically wrote to self-sabotage me.”

It did not get any better for Sasha when she went to another professor in her program for assistance.
I was able to connect with my community health teacher. And so, I go, and she is basically saying that she was hesitant to give me a recommendation because I was late to her class. And I'm like but you know community health was what I wanted to be in. "Yes, I always knew that. If I give you a recommendation, I have to write in your recommendation that you were late to my class." I said, "Go ahead." I said, "I worked hard for this job interview." And for me to go through all of this stuff, pass this degree, and, you motherfuckers are going to sit and tell me that you are not going to give me no fucking recommendation. I finished this degree and you pretty much going to block me from a job? For bullshit?

As with Karla, Sasha also experienced a lack of support from her professors within her department even after reaching out to them several times. She took it very personally when several professors within her department knowingly saw that she was struggling both inside the classroom and even with obtaining a job within their field and still chose to write her off as a poor student. She knew that she had worked extremely hard and given her all in these classes with these professors, only to have them turn into barriers for her; it was something that has stuck with Sasha for many years.

Trina described her experiences in higher education as “somewhat unpleasant.” She talked about multiple experiences where she did not feel as though she was offered the proper support system at school. She said:

I had a lot of mixed emotions about school, particularly at the university. It's not a very diverse school to me. My classroom experiences were very, umm, what word am I looking for? [pause] They were [pause] I had a lot of negative experiences despite me being a good student. Just the interactions I had in class with my teachers and my peers, they weren't always positive. I don't feel like it's an inclusive environment. I often felt like I had to work extremely hard to gain respect. Yeah. It wasn't inclusive because I do feel like there were forms of [long pause] I faced a lot of, I would say, racism because of the way I was treated. Because it wasn't inclusive there wasn't really a big support system. Just not having that support network and being treated differently than my classmates. It was very blatant. Having to cope with that and still focus on school and still be a mom and travel an hour away and make sure my finances were in order to make sure it didn't intervene with the care of my children or husband or household or my bills or my ability to get to campus. Often, when I reached out, not all the time but most of the time when I reached out, the response I got was not helpful. My professors, either they responded late or it was very broad or they seemed somewhat annoyed. Their attitude
was very dismissive sometimes. That was hard. I often just read my textbook and figured that out.

Trina began talking about an experience with a professor that caused a lot of internal turmoil for her. She was confused about a specific assignment that was due and needed clarification. After the completion of the assignment, the response she received from her professor was not supportive. She offered:

This professor is the same person that looked at my paper. What I've seen before with a lot of kids of non-color, a lot of students of non-color, they're pulled to the side. They're offered support. They're guided. From what I've seen they're often supported and guided if they have errors in their ways academically. She looked at my paper and she told me I wrote like an infant or something like that and I needed to go back [sarcastically laughs] [pause] I needed to start over and go back to [pause] it was a low-level grade. I'm like, "What the fuck?" I felt very small. I went home and I cried to my husband.

Trina ended up going on YouTube and studying up on how to become a better writer. She ended up getting an A out of the class. I asked her if she ever talked to the professor about the incident or anyone else and she said, “No. I don’t trust this school.” Trina also went on to say:

I didn't have anybody to talk to. I had to deal with my experiences on my own. I had to wait until I got home to talk to my husband. I didn't have any friends or acquaintances who were peers that I could connect with on campus [long pause] It was very lonely, especially when it came to homework. Reaching out or if you had a bad day or if you couldn't come to school, because I had kids. I didn't have anybody that I could text or call to get notes for me or anything like that. I had to make all of that work for myself.

From the start of her college career, Trina felt that her campus was not inclusive, and she received little to no support from her professors. She had an extremely demeaning experience that had a resounding impact on her perspective of the university that she attended. Since she was a nontraditional student, she had no outlet or support system on campus that she was able to reach out to when needed.
Michelle also felt the pressures of school but had little to no support. She felt that the lack of support she had is what caused her emotional eating, which led to depression. Other factors attributed to her poor health, as she shared:

Feeling lonely. The anxiety and stress of, "Am I going to pass this class? Do I need to study more? Do I have time?" Being overwhelmed with school, being overwhelmed with schoolwork, being overwhelmed with social life. Just trying to have the full circle of the college experience. So yeah, I can hang out with all of my friends and just party and have the time of my life. But a lot of the times, there were times where I just wanted to be by myself. But in the same sense, I still felt alone even in a room full of people.

I asked Michelle if she ever talked about how she felt with her parents, and at first she said no because…

I didn't want them to feel like, "Okay, then what are you in school for then?" Because that was the expectation: "You're smart, you'll do this, you're going to go to school." And whether or not I felt like it was enough or I was enough or I was smart enough, I had to push past whatever I felt because I had to succeed at this.

Eventually, Michelle did speak with her mother about how she felt, and unfortunately it was not the support that she needed. In a very emotional and teary-eyed response, she said that her mother’s response was, “Depressed, what are you depressed about it? You're too young to be. What are you depressed about it? You're too young to be depressed. So for what? And it's just like, ‘I don't know.’” Michelle chose to reach out to her mother for support; however, she was still met with a lack of understanding from her mother about her mental state and the stressors that she encountered while in college.

Melanie described an incident during her undergrad where some of her White classmates wore blackface during a talent show because they were performing a Michael Jackson song. She felt like situations like that could be avoided if her White counterparts were provided lessons about cultural sensitivity at the start of their academic career. Melanie said:
Like my freshman year I was like these White kids need to be required to take an African American studies class. I don't think this should be an optional course. This needs to be required. American history is required. Why isn't African American history, which is rooted in American [pause], that is American history. You know, so that was always, because once again these people think they know everything. I guess ya'll running the college so you assume. But that was disappointing. It was just very disappointing to be surrounded by people who I feel like, almost consciously are looking the other way at those “little incidents” and writing them off as “little incidents.”

Even in the law school that she attends now, she feels that there needs to be more accountability shown by the school, and specifically by professors inside of the classroom. She gave an example of her class that focuses on constitutional law. She said:

The classes we take, like constitutional law, which a lot of these previous laws that we had were racist. So the professors really skate over that. And that's something that keeps happening. So anytime there's a course where, hey, this law was explicitly racist, the professor will not. And they don't even open up a discussion for topic because I feel like they just don't want to make the White people uncomfortable. But it's like what about us four Black people in the class? Cause that's all it be. There's not enough of us.

Here, Melanie shared that her professors did not support her or her other Black classmates in addressing issues of racism that were being shown within areas of the law they were studying. She felt that it glanced over so her White classmates would not be uncomfortable or offended. However, it created a gap for her and her learning experience within the classroom.

Although they were not getting the support they needed, most of the participants stayed at their university until completion. However, Vanessa refused to stay at a private nursing school that she was attending shortly after college. She had an overall negative experience throughout her time there and she knew she could not stay any longer. She offered:

It was just a negative experience for me, just from the academic standpoint. Again, just not seeing myself in that school, I was so eager to start a nursing program that I was ignoring all the red flags that typical people would see. The fact that it is a true definition of a predominantly White institution. The fact that there weren't many Black students at that school, there weren't any Black professors at the school. Just having that uneasy feeling. I didn't get that personal feeling that would help me actually advance in my studies or advance in the program. It was almost as though it was not a setup for failure,
but there wasn't that [pause] I didn't have that support, to put it in a nutshell, that I needed to really thrive there. So when there's that lack of support, why even continue?

It had gotten to a point where Vanessa and some of her classmates went to the administration to express their concerns about the lack of representation. However, she stated that their demands were “brushed off and it wasn’t taken seriously.” This had a tremendous impact on Vanessa within her academic career and her mental and physical health. Vanessa stated:

It was just a bad time. Again, struggling with this school, the content, the instructors. I was at the point where I was questioning my worth and my intelligence--Am I stupid? Am I going to make it? There are multiple times where I felt, where I didn't feel worthy or I just didn't feel like I was capable or smart, knowing good and well I was, but just having blow after blow and, again, not having that support that is so necessary in school, not having that definitely play havoc on me. So, it just wasn't an awesome time mentally for me during that period. When you face any type of mental health, it just affects your physical. So, not having the energy to do things, not having the focus to do normal things, not wanting to get up. Maybe there are times where I just didn't feel like getting out of bed, like not doing anything, fatigue, just depression. It just all ties in.

I asked Vanessa if she received any support from the school when she started feeling this way, and she said it was very minimal. She said that the administration told her, “Oh, maybe you need to talk to somebody.” So again, brushing it off, like “it's not us, it's you.”

**Microaggressions**

A lot of the participants had experiences with microaggressions in school that had an impact on them during their college career. The microaggressive behavior that the participants encountered came from their peers as well as their professors inside of the classroom. Some of the participants described how their intellect and race were challenged on several occasions by these experiences. All of these experiences had a lasting impression on the participants in regard to how they viewed themselves as well as the colleges and universities that they were attending.

Michelle said that her experience with microaggressions happened mainly on campus with friends. She said, “Just as well as I wasn't exposed to a lot of White people, there were a lot
of people who were not exposed to Black people.” She said that sometimes they would say, “Oh, your hair is so pretty; can I touch it?” And it's like, "Why is that such a thing to you?" Those comments didn’t really bother Michelle, as she stated:

For the most part, if it was someone I knew, I didn't necessarily feel anything because I understood, "You have no exposure to African-American people whatsoever. So for you, it's like maybe it's a learning experience." Just as well as something in their culture is a learning experience to me. Like, "Why do you all wash your hair every day?"

Because of Michelle’s lack of exposure to being around White people, she seemed a bit more understanding with their level of questioning. She was doing the same thing when she first started college.

Karla spoke about an experience she had in class when she and a group of her classmates stood up to read an excerpt from a play in one of her English classes. After she finished reading, she said that an older White woman in the class approached her and said, “I was just so impressed. You just read so well.” She was astonished by the compliment because “it wasn't like, ‘Aw man, you guys were really into it.’ It wasn't like things that like go along with drama, like you read so well. It was as if, ‘Oh, but you read it.’” Karla said after the shock wore off, she just laughed it off but noted to herself that “she legitimately needed me to know that she felt that I could read.”

Other participants were not so eager to laugh off their experiences. Loraine, for example, describes three different experiences where she dealt with microaggressions as a student. Her first experience was when she first started in college. She had written a paper in one of her earlier classes, and when it was time to get the paper back, she noticed that she had a note on hers saying, “Can you see me?” When she met with her professor, she said:

"This was very well-written.” And she said, "Did you have any help?" Nope, I did not. She said, "Well, where did you go to school?" I said, in the inner city. She said, "Well."
So, she had said, "I'm not used to seeing inner city students write this well." She was real frank with me.

I asked Loraine how she felt about the comment and she said, “I was shocked! To be questioned on my success, I was like wow.” Loraine said that she was grateful that she was able to respond to the professor in an appropriate manner, and she suggested to the professor that she get access to her high school transcript, where she would be able to see that she was a straight-A student and salutatorian of her class. She said that the professor never questioned her again. Another experience she spoke about involved her going to visit one of her professor’s classes because her professor told her that most of her students are White suburban kids and they have never really been around Black people before. She came to the class and started speaking with the students, when one gentleman in the class said:

"I was taught that Blacks had big butts because they had tails, tails like a monkey." He was for real. He was for real! I thought it was a joke, and I was like, "Are you kidding me?" The whole class got quiet. He said, "No.”… This was like in the early '80s. Yeah, you would have been shocked. Yeah, unbelievable. Unbelievable. The fact that he actually had the courage to speak it out loud, that blew me away too.

I asked her how she responded, and she said, “I gave him a firm no! I was angry.” She continued to speak with him and said:

“That is the most biggest falsehood I have ever heard in my life,” I said. "Why would you think that this group of people have tails, and we're human beings, and no other groups of human beings have tails?" I mean, it doesn't make sense. I kept telling him, "This makes no sense what you were told, and at some point as you got older, were you not able to figure out this is not logical?"

Loraine’s last recollection of a microaggression was while she was a student worker at the university she attended. She said that she became close with a White female co-worker who had been born and raised in a small town. She said that one of the first comments that she made when they became close was, “You’re really nice for a colored person.” I asked Loraine how she
felt in that moment, and again she said, “I was shocked. I had to pause because I had to remember who she was and what her life experiences were. But I took that as a teachable moment to educate her.” She continued with her conversation and said:

I first corrected her with the terminology, and then I was just saying, "Do you really think niceness only comes in certain races?" I said, "I think it's your lack of exposure to Black people that has caused you to feel like what you see on the media, maybe the angry Black or the violent Black, is what we all are." I said, "That's not true."

Although Lorraine was angered by her co-worker’s statement, she felt that this was a good opportunity to address society’s as well as the media’s portrayal of Blacks and how it could have influenced her co-worker’s perception. She wanted her co-worker to understand that there are different types of people in every race.

Vanessa talked about a time when her being selected at a top school was questioned while she was having a conversation with a co-worker. She said that her co-worker was upset because her friend did not get into the same school that Vanessa was accepted into and said that it was because Vanessa was a minority. Vanessa said:

Little does she know I was in the top two percentile of my class. I was in various organizations, I worked, I was well rounded. So maybe your friend wasn't as well rounded as I was and she was like, "Oh, you know, it's a minority thing. You are a token." She didn't use the term “token” but she was alluding to that. I was extremely pissed. I had to actually shut the conversation down because she just did not realize how offensive she was being. I wanted to chalk it up to small-town, country girl. But again, that's the ignorance of [pause] I don't want to generalize and say all White culture, but a lot of White culture that you know, oh you know, if ever a Black person were to succeed, it's because we got a leg up. No sweetheart, it's because I worked my ass off, that's why.

Vanessa shared what most of the participants talked about in their interviews, which is the perspective of the White culture that Blacks or African Americans are looked at with very low standards, and if they do succeed it has to be with some form of help or assistance. The statements that were made by her co-worker are a prime example of microaggressive behavior
because even though her comments were extremely offensive, her co-worker did not perceive
them to be.

Trina had a plethora of experiences with microaggressions. She also had a lot to say in
terms of how she felt in those moments and how they impact her learning experience. She was
able to give detailed accounts of what she calls small to large experiences of microaggressions.
Trina said that her name is often mispronounced and constantly waved off like, “Oh, there’s no
importance in getting it right,” and she said that this comes from professors and peers. Even
when it comes to dialogue she gets constantly frustrated because her White peers in class will
come up to her and be like “yo, yo, yo, what’s up sister girl?” or if she wears her hair in an afro
puff, they’ll come up to her and pat her hair and say, “Oh my gosh, it's so soft. It's so different.
It's not like normal, boring hair.” And Trina said that she just stands there and thinks, “First of
all, I'm not a pet. Don't touch me. And you ask before you touch somebody. And normal? Okay.”
One encounter she had with a White classmate over the summer she described as weird:

A White woman in my class came up to me and just put her hand out and was like, "I just
wanted to see if I was as dark as you yet." [pause] She was like, "No offense, but you
have the perfect tan color." I was like, "Oh"… She didn't even ask, we weren't cool. I
didn't know her. We were in class together. And she felt like it was okay to not only
invade my space, but she thought her commentary was harmless.

When I asked Trina how she felt in those moments, here is what she had to say:

It depends on the day. If I'm having a day, then, anger. If I've had a great day, annoyed.
And if I've had just an emotional day, I become very sad and disappointed. But it
definitely depends on the day. My response is typically always the same, though,
especially because I'm on this campus, and I'm leaving my home an hour away, and I
have kids. I just don't see in this world, in this climate, even on this campus, my response,
if I responded in a defensive manner, I believe that I would be blamed.

There were times when even if the comment was not directly geared toward her, Trina
was still impacted by it. Trina talked about a group project in one of her classes where she had to
work with three of her other classmates. Each one of them took turns presenting their parts for the project geared toward African American children. She stated that “two of the White girls were responsible for creating interventions, healthy interventions. I kid you not, they said, ‘We thought basketball would be great because they're good at that.’” What shocked Trina the most was that her professor never corrected them, and said they did a fantastic job on their part of the presentation. Another experience with a group in one of her classes had an impact on her and another Black classmate. She said that they were in groups and they were trying to figure out who was going to go up to the front of the class to present. Each one of her group members said that they did not want to go up. One of her group members, who happened to be White, turned to their group member, who was a dark-skinned gentleman, and said, “You should do it because, if you blush, nobody will be able to tell.” Trina said that you could physically see that he was bothered by the comment, but he was “cautious” because even though they were both upset by the comment and wanted to say something to her, as she and her classmate discussed later, “that ain't going to go over well… If the White girl start crying there's going to be some trouble. They never going to try to hear our side of the story.”

Trina went on to describe two more experiences with microaggression with professors. She described how in her multicultural class, they talked about “code-switching,” and she and four of her classmates who were Black were talking about why they code-switch. She said that they started talking in what she called “AAVE” dialect, or African American vernacular English, and they were saying, “You knew how to behave when she [their mothers] was on the phone and when you were outside with her, depending on how she was speaking. We were just telling each other. That was an unconscious learning.” Trina began describing the setup of the class saying
that “this part of the class was Black and Latin, and all of the other people over there was White.” She then said that the professor directed the White students and said:

“I want you guys to look at this interaction. Watch them. Listen.”… It felt like Animal Planet. She told them to watch us. "Are you hearing this? Do you hear the way they speak?" We just got quiet. [pause] We went in the hallway on break. All of us was literally like, “What the fuck? What was that? What is going on?”… One of the Latin girls was like, “Yeah. That was weird. That was very weird, the way she had them watching y'all talking.”

Trina was extremely agitated with the whole experience. When I asked her how she felt, she said, “You don't tell people to stare. What the fuck? We're your peers. We're not participants. We not here to be studied. You ask so you can learn. This is a learning environment. But none of that happened.” She continued talking a little more about code-switching and how one of her professors told her to “bring the Black woman into the room” and when she asked him what he meant by that he replied by saying, “I know you’re loud.” Trina said that she has never been known to be loud and was confused and insulted by his comments and asked him, “Who did you create in your head?” Trina said they had a long conversation about the experience and some of her White classmates left the room because they seemed uncomfortable. I asked her how she felt seeing her White classmates leave the room, and she said:

I feel like they are living in a world that's catered for them and to them. The fact that you are in an educational institution, and you are preparing yourself to go into society and interact with a diverse clientele of any type, and you can't have a dialogue about racial differences. It's concerning, but the fact that they get to walk away, it's so typical. It's typical. It's how society was made for them. They get uncomfortable, they have the opportunity to shut down and pretend like it's not happening. It used to be disheartening, but now it's just like [shrugs shoulders].

We began talking more about microaggressions and what she called the “blatant racism” that she experiences in her classes. I asked her how she thinks it impacts her health, and she said:

It imposes a lot of unnecessary stress. Sometimes it's depressing. It leads to me feeling a lot of negative emotions that I shouldn't have to feel because of my skin color. I feel like
sometimes I got to force myself to get up and go. You shouldn't have to brace yourself for the day, every day. In school and going to the classroom just worried about the next stupid thing that's going to be said or the event that's going to happen. It affects my physical health. I get tired. Then I got to brush that off because I'm a mom. It's a lot. When I'm stressed, I don't like working out. I don't like eating healthy. I feel like it breaks down my body slowly but surely. I feel like I'm getting to that point. I'm proud of myself for getting my master's degree. I'm proud that I'm going for a second one. But I don't think I can go anymore. My ambition started out up here [reaches above her head]. But dealing with this stuff all the time I see a cap. I feel like I can't keep doing this. I can't keep putting myself through this.

Trina gave a direct example of what happens to her mentally and physically when she deals with microaggressions on a daily basis. She felt as though she was doing something that her White counterparts do not have to do, which is prep mentally for what they are about to encounter in what should be safe spaces on campus, but for Trina, it was becoming detrimental to her health and her level of ambition and enthusiasm for higher education. These participants have had multiple encounters with microaggressions or microaggressive behavior. They felt that they have been placed in categories that belittle them and question their levels of intelligence, integrity, and abilities as students and their cultural identity as Black or African American women.

The Representative

When talking about their educational experiences, several of the participants began describing how they often felt like they had to be the “representative” for the entire Black race. At times, this feeling also coincided with microaggressions. These experiences dictated how participants acted or “presented” themselves, both in and out of the classroom.

Tammy noticed that at the first college that she attended, the White students would come and ask her whatever they felt they needed to know about Black people. She said that they felt comfortable asking her because they felt that she was not the “curse you out” type, so they would
ask her questions or make statements like, “We didn't know Black people shaved their legs. We didn't know Black people [pause], what was it, wore deodorant.” It was all so “crazy” to her, but she didn’t let it bother her at first. However, she began to notice that they would come up to her more often and then she began to say to them, “Are you coming to me because you think I speak for all Black people? We are not the same. I don't speak for all Black people.” At first Tammy did not mind answering certain questions; however, she realized that her classmates were turning her into this representative for the Black race. She felt that she needed to let them know that she could not speak for every Black person because we are not all the same.

Kimberley said that her White classmates felt that in some way they could relate to her because she was “the one that could speak” and they didn’t feel like she was an “angry Black woman” who got upset every time they would say something to her. I asked Kimberley how it made her feel and she said:

It made me feel as though some people just don't want to learn about us as a people. It made me feel as though sometimes being used so that you had a Black friend. Or how do they say it, like “my best friend is Black” and that kind of stuff like that.

Kimberley said it could be very stressful and tiring because…

[t]rying to make them see that we are, as a people, not all of what they saw on the news, but I have had to invoke that. I have had to invoke that purposefully in anything that I write. I've had to do that. It's not like they were coming to me and seeking that out.

Kimberley described a time when she had to explain to her sociology teacher that not every Black person lived in the ghetto. She remembers that he asked her in class what it was like living in the ghetto. Kimberley has lived in Oak Park since she was a child, so she told her teacher that “this picture that you're depicting, I don't know anything about.” But I think the most devastating part for her was as she stated:
I had to really explain that, but I had to explain that in front of all of my White counterparts, which just for me was like, "I can't believe that you would even [pause] associate every Black person to that standard, and even in that standard, there's a whole lot of good people in that.

I asked Kimberley if she remembered how it made her feel, and she said:

In that moment, I was [pause] hurt more than anything, and then I became angry, but at first I was very hurt about the fact that, you know, how you can feel you're included in everything. "Okay, we're all going to class, we're all talking about this topic," and then the teacher singles you out. So at that point, I was hurt by that because it really made me realize, "You're not like everybody else… “They don't look at you in that same manner.” I hadn't felt that before.

These experiences had a lasting impact on Kimberley and her mindset toward school and how she needed to perform and act in the classroom. She gained this “meet up, measure up” mentality that she said ultimately had a major impact on her health. Kimberley stated, “My anxiety was at an all-time high. I think that it was the first time I had ever experienced stomach ulcer-type issues.” These issues caused her to have to leave school and come back when she was better.

Trina was extremely irritated while talking about having similar conversations that Kimberley had with her professors. She said that when it came to explaining the Black culture to her professors she felt that “we're attempting to teach you how to teach us, which means we are not 100% focused on our education. It means we have to do something extra that other students of non-color or White students don't have to do.” She went on to explain how it makes her feel and asked me:

I don't know if you've ever had this experience. You're in class and then something off happens. It just throws you. So you lose 15 to 20 minutes because you're trying to recoup and come back. That's 15 to 20 minutes other students had because they weren't bothered. You need all of that [pause] and focus. But because what happened personally affects you and you are a human being, you can't help it, you know. Not only are you trying to get back connected. Where does that experience go? Where do you put it?
Trina explained how she felt she was being cheated out of a complete learning experience because she had to take the time to focus on teaching her White peers and professors about her culture. She was also exploring how she should handle situations when she is distracted by certain behaviors from her White counterparts.

Melanie stated, “I was surrounded by White people and I felt like many times I was like the representation of the race in class because I was probably one of or sometimes the only Black person.” She said that there were plenty of times when her classmates asked her questions about her previous high school and was astonished by her background and level of success. However, at first, she said, “Honestly, oftentimes I was not shocked, so I wasn't offended. Maybe it was my defense mechanism because I almost expected, which I don't know in itself is sad, but it's kind of sad.” Melanie said that she experienced multiple emotions when it came to school, but it wasn’t until she entered law school that she was able to identify what she was feeling. She said:

Kind of like the imposter syndrome where you feel they're so one, a few of us. So I felt like sometimes, because there were so few of us, like I had to be the representation and it kind of puts this like boulder, it's like a heavy weight on you because sometimes, because you feel like [long pause] I could honestly say sometimes that I felt like I had to always be articulate. Like I couldn't take a day off necessarily. So like my freshman year I ran myself into the ground so much to the point, and I did very well, but like I was so tired from overdoing everything to kind of like perform at my absolute best that like burned me out. So like I was truly burned out, like that first semester did great, but then I didn't do as well my second semester because I was so tired mentally.

For Melanie, the impact of the imposter syndrome caused her to become the representative for the entire Black race. She felt that she could not rest because she always had to be at her best. The result of her representing nonstop was her being drained mentally.

Michelle felt the pressures of being the representative in school as well, especially when it came to group projects. She said:
So it's like, "You got to do better. You got to do good." You are in your class and you're like, "Okay, this is the expectation and this is what we have to accomplish. What are you going to do?" So you want to make sure you're working twice as hard, you want to make sure that your input is in everything, that your contribution matters, so it doesn't get thrown on the back burner.

Michelle said that having this feeling was very irritating and stressful.

Olivia talked about an experience that she had in the cafeteria that made her have the “representative” mentality. She said that a Black student was upset about the food he had received, and he got angry and yelled at one of the workers. She said a White woman in line turned to her and said, “That’s what gives your people a bad name.” When she questioned the woman about what she said in regard to classifying all Black people, the woman said, “Well, you’re different.” Olivia said it was like she was saying, “You’re special.” Olivia went on to say, “I don't know that person either, personally, but now somehow I got some responsibility for how that person behaves or doesn't behave.” It made her think that if that person felt that way, then “we're being watched, we're being, well, it's always, you're always on.” This caused her to have the mentality that she didn’t want to give the White people something to say, like, “I don't want to be the reason why some people feel negatively about Black people or Black women or whatever, I think I have a responsibility.” Because of that interaction with the White woman in the cafeteria, Olivia had taken on the role of “representing” for the entire Black race. What is interesting is that even though she did not personally know that student the White woman was referring to, that comment had a lasting impact on the way that Olivia acted in and out of school because she did not want to be the person to humiliate or embarrass the Black race or Black women.

Karla talked about being the representative in her English classes and how it impacted her mentally. She said she felt like she had to be the “authority” in class whenever it had anything to
do with being Black, but then she began to ask herself the question, “Why should I have to be?”

She said that it caused what she called “mental splits” for her, and by the end of class she would just feel exhausted. I asked her how she dealt with those emotions and she said:

For a long time I couldn't even [pause] I couldn't talk about it because I didn't even have the language. I don't even know what to tell you. All I know is that I feel something and it's not right. But it's very hard. It becomes very hard mentally when you have to balance all of that, then you still have to show up, and you still have to do your work and then you still have to go to your job and then you still have to [pause] if you have a family, if you have children, then you'd have to do that too. It becomes a lot.

Karla could not pinpoint exactly how she was feeling at the time; however, she knew that something was wrong, and it was impacting her mental health. She felt that it was hard trying to figure out how to balance being the representative in her classes and her life outside of the classroom.

Justine talked about how even in her doctoral program she felt that she had to be the representative. She said that often she is the only Black person in her class, and she wonders:

Am I supposed to be here? Am I smart enough to be here? Do my professors, do they think I'm smart? Are they going to judge me because I'm a black woman? Or if I say something, are they going to judge how I stay it? I'm always conscious of, do my subjects and verbs agree? Do I sound smart? Instead of just being able to say what I need to say and not worry about that.

Justine implied feeling like an imposter almost because often she was the only Black or minority person in her classes. To maintain her position as a good student who is worthy to be in the doctoral program, she always did those self-checks with her language to not only prove that she deserved to be there but to also represent for the Black race.

Carmen said that being the representative had more of a mental impact on her because “you're fighting who you are with who you think you need to be. You're not sure what you need to be because they [White people] flip at the drop of a hat if they want to be inclusive today or
not.” She shared that her son even told her that he code-switches and intentionally tries to fit in with multiple people in college because he does not want to be looked at as “the bad Black child,” and he said that he learned that from watching her. Although most of the participants had an issue with being the representative, Loraine saw it as a good thing. After she talked about the experience that she had going to her professor’s classes, so the White students could see and interact with a Black person, she said that she appreciated the opportunity to “set the record straight” because she was able to show the White students in the class that Black people were just like everybody else.

The perception that the participants had about being a “representative” for the Black or African American race brought on a level of unnecessary stress. The participants could not focus completely on their education because they were concerned with how they were being perceived by their White peers and educators. Participants noted that this feeling was not some made-up notion, rather it came from the constant questioning, comments and ideas that their White counterparts had about the Black culture.

**Self-Care: “Pray about it”**

The participants were asked about taking care of their mental and physical health while enrolled in their programs. For physical health, a few participants said that they would work out at the gym on campus or do other physical activities off campus such as walking or working out at home. Out of the 15 participants, only three said that they took care of their mental health while in higher education. Vanessa shared that she felt like she was forced to talk to the therapist at her nursing school after she complained to administration about the lack of support she felt she was getting from the school. She also noted, “I’m big on like talking to individuals who reflect me. So, it was a White male that I was speaking with. So, I really didn't find it helpful.” She also
felt that there was some resistance on her part too since she felt that she was being forced to talk to him.

Carmen, who was still in school while participating in this project, said that outside of the counselor she sees sometimes for “being Black at work” and the death of her unborn daughter, she says, “I have no focus on taking care of my mental health. It is going to crash. You just do until you can't.” When I asked her if she felt like she was enduring or just pushing through her mental health, she said that she was because “what other choice do you have? If this is what you want to do, this is what you have to do. There's no other choice.” Melanie said that she started seeing a therapist her junior year of college, but as it was stated previously, she refused to tell anyone until years later because of the stigma that is attached to seeing a therapist in the Black community.

Jaleesa experienced an ectopic pregnancy her sophomore year in college and had to undergo extensive tests and even received chemotherapy injections because there were cancerous cells that were found after she had an emergency dilation and curettage, or a D & C, a procedure that is used to remove tissue from inside the uterus, which terminated her pregnancy. She said that her mental state was “shot.” She stated, “I was in such a dark place. I would not go to class. I would not go out of my room. I wouldn't really talk to people. And that happened probably for like a month and a half.” However, when I asked her what she did to take care of her mental health, she said that she did not do anything because “I don't really think that I thought about my mental health during those periods of time when I was in college. I don't know if I would have put them in words that way.” Here, Jaleesa described going through a traumatic experience early in her college career. However, she did not have the understanding that she may have needed support mentally, even though she described signs of mental distress.
Tammy had a similar opinion when asked about taking care of her mental health in college. She said, “I didn't even know what it was to take care of your mental health while I was in school.” She admitted that she did not focus on mental health at all until six years ago when she was diagnosed with cancer. She said that in a way she was taught not to focus on mental health. She said, “You don't think about it, it don't exist. And that's just how it was. You don't sit and dwell on it.” However, when I asked about what she wished she knew while she was attending college, she shared, “I wish I knew about the whole mental health thing” because she felt physically she was fine, but she felt that she took on more than she should have mentally, and she stated, “I wouldn't have taken on as much mentally if I would've known what it could do in the long run for me personally.” Like Jaleesa, Tammy did not understand what mental health was or the importance of taking care of herself mentally. However, she acknowledges that if she had known about the importance of mental health she would not have taken on as much as she did in college.

Tamika also said that she wished she knew or understood more about mental health while in school. She said that she knew about counseling services on campus, but she stated, “I didn't really take it serious because of the environment in which I grew up in. It was still very taboo with like going to therapy. You're crazy or whatever. All these stigmas behind it.” She said that if she had gotten past the stigmas she would have gone to counseling and dealt with some of her past childhood traumas. Olivia also wished that she understood mental health and what she called “emotional development” because, “if you're dealing with stuff that you just don't know how to deal with, then your mental health is not right.”

When it came down to taking care of her mental health for Kimberley, she did a lot of “pulling away” and did not seek help from counselors on campus. She said that she tried to help
herself and do what she described as “pull myself through.” When I asked her why she never went to see a counselor, she said because…

[Most of them were Caucasian and I felt like they could not understand my plight, nor did I want to tell my plight to someone that was not ... Like if I was sitting talking to you, I could probably spill out whatever, but if I was talking to someone else that I felt might look at me as though I was a statistic or something like that, I never would go to one.]

Kimberley chose to deal with her mental health on her own, rather than feel like she was being judged by someone who did not look like her or understand her cultural background. It would have been added work for an already difficult situation.

Initially, Karla said that she felt like she did not need to take care of her mental health, but after reflecting on her undergraduate career, she said, “That is probably where the burnout happened,” and she admittedly said that “I didn't know about self-care. That wasn't a term that I knew then even. I just knew I wanted to finish the best that I possibly could, and I did. But then maybe did I need a break?” Here Karla is coming to terms with the consequences of her pushing herself to finish her undergraduate degree, and the impact it had on her mental health. She questioned whether or not she should have taken a break to take care of her mental health.

Some participants relied on family and community support to get the relief that they needed mentally. For example, Loraine said that during the time she was in college she relied on her fiancé and older siblings for mental support. Justine said that because she went to school out of state, she was under what she called “watched care” at a church that was near the HBCU she attended. She also said what kept her grounded mentally, emotionally, and spiritually was attending church and being around her sorority sisters.

Trina said that her way of taking care of her mental health is spending time with her family, and she says that she is a spiritual person, so she prays a lot. However, she did say that
she fails at self-care. She stated that it’s easy to fail “because it's easy to get stressed. One of my kids gets sick or my husband gets sick or I got assignments due or some racist stuff at work or some racist stuff in the classroom. Life. Just life.” While these participants have found their own ways to deal with self-care, they recognize that more needs to be done for them to be completely healed. What should also be noted is that none of these participants relied on or mentioned any resources from their colleges or universities.

Most of the women talked about how they were given the advice to “pray about it” when it came to dealing with stress and/or issues pertaining to mental health while in college. Justine talked about the loss of her baby while she was in graduate school. She shared that it was difficult for her mentally because she did not know how to deal with her mental health. She went on to say:

Because it's taboo. And for us, a lot of times, they tap into your spirituality, so you're supposed to pray it away. You're supposed to be strong enough, you're a strong Black woman. And so a lot of that was instilled in me that you just suck it up, you just keep pushing. And I had really gotten to a point where I didn't want to, almost embarrassed to say that that is what I needed, but I knew if I didn't, I probably would've killed myself honestly at that point because I had experienced the death of my child and I didn't know how to deal with that. Nobody had prepared me how to deal with loss in that way because in our family we didn't talk about things like that. And so I wasn't prepared to have a miscarriage or a stillbirth or how to deal with it. It was just, you suck it up and keep going. And in that moment I knew I couldn't. There was like way too much on me.

Justine spoke about the perception within Black culture that an answer to all of your problems is to pray about your problems until they go away. She admittedly knew that she needed more help but was hesitant because of how she might be perceived.

Karla talked about her feelings of isolation during graduate school. It left her in what she called “a dark place” and she did not know where to turn to for help. When she tried to talk to her mom about it, she said:
And then when I would try to talk to my mom about it, I mean she was very positive, but she didn't really give me anything. It's just like, "Stay strong," and then, "But you know you could just pray about it." And I'm like, "Yes, and I'm trying to stay strong and I'm praying about it, but that's not really helping." And that didn't seem like a tangible solution to me.

Karla felt the pressure of cultural beliefs. As she stated, she was trying to be strong by just praying about it, but she knew that was not solving her problems about the way that she felt.

When I asked Sasha about speaking to a counselor about all the issues that she was dealing with while in school, she said:

'It's like you should just pray about it [laughing]. Um, and that will just solve your needs. And that's why I thank God for me accidentally walking into that class on meditation because I was praying, and it wasn't enough.'

Again, another situation of recognizing that praying was not enough. Sasha was grateful that she was able to find a resource that could help her.

Michelle became a little emotional talking about her battle with what she thought was depression and anxiety brought on by the stressors of school. During that time, she felt lost because, as she stated:

And so it's like you try to talk to people, they don't understand it. They think it's all in your head. They tell you to press on, just pray about it. And sometimes you just really can't. Even if you do all of those, and above and beyond, if you don't know about your mental health, you won't solve it.

With Michelle, she tried to reach out to her peers for help and she was still told to pray about it, and there is even a level of dismissal with them stating that it was just in her head or made up in regard to how she was feeling. She acknowledged that she tried to be strong and just keep going and pray about it, but she needed to know more about her mental health to solve her problems.

Melanie talked about how she really started to struggle her junior year of undergraduate studies because there was a lot going on personally and academically. Melanie said:
Because there was just a lot going on and you're always told push through, pray your way through it, you're going to be okay. And like, yeah, I'm always eventually okay, but I am not only physically tired, I'm mentally drained.

Having the mindset of praying about it is the reason why when Melanie did seek therapy she was hesitant about letting anyone know. She went on to say:

Like that's [pause] I mean I didn't even tell people back at home and I was going to therapy in college and I didn't tell my friends until after we graduated, like literally many years, because it’s just one of them things I grew up saying, like pray and everything will be okay, pray and everything's fine. So I didn't tell anyone I was going to therapy.

Melanie was one of the very few participants who sought therapy while in college because the mental struggles that she faced were overwhelming and she knew something needed to be done outside of prayer. However, thinking of her cultural norms around mental health and self-care, she knew she could not tell her family or her peers out of fear that her spiritual beliefs and her level of strength as a Black woman may be questioned.

When I spoke with Kimberley about her struggles with mental health in college, this is how she tried to deal with it and the advice that she was given:

I took to friends, a lot of friends. I talked to, like, my grandmother about it. She was very Christian, very "pray about it." She would always try to just check in and see, "You doing okay?" and I would be like, "Eh, yeah. Kind of," but just talking it out with her was very helpful for me.

I asked Kimberley if she considered speaking to a counselor about her anxiety, and she said:

I knew that talking to my sister-friends in my close-knit [group]was more relieving for me than sitting up there trying to talk to somebody that I had to explain, like my family heritage. That just was not, no. It was not something that I cared to do. I think it would bring on more anxiety because I would be looking at the person like, "Okay, so what are you really thinking about me?" I had never gotten to the point, and still to this day I feel in some aspect, well in a lot of aspects, that I would feel judged sitting across from someone, and not that everyone would, but what my true feelings are is that if I was sitting across from a White woman in her twenties, thirties, forties, whatever, and I'm talking to them about my issues, I just don't even feel that they could even affectively grasp what was going on with me.
Kimberley chose to seek counsel with individuals who looked like her and understood her background as a Black woman. She did not see that level of representation inside of the counseling department at her university, so she chose what she thought would be more comforting for her and less anxiety producing.

Vanessa stated that she was raised with the statement, “You just pray about it all the time.” She felt that it was a cultural lesson that was taught where you just “give it to God. God’s going to help you.” She applied that to many aspects of her life during and after school. While similarly Alexis knew about the phrase, she felt that is how she took care of her mental health this past semester, which was very exhausting for her. She said that she did not really have a plan when it came to mental health. Alexis stated:

Mentally, I prayed, I prayed and I just talked to God and I just tried to read my daily devotions. Just really just having some time and I had to really sit down and say, "Okay, I do a lot for everybody, but I need to take some time for myself." When I knew I reached my limit this semester, I was like, "I have to sit down. I really have to do for me and take some time, so I have to pray." I definitely have, I did a lot of praying this semester.

Alexis found the comfort and support she needed by praying, reading scripture, and figuring out what she needed to do to get through the semester. The participants held their own levels of spiritual beliefs and what they felt they needed to do regarding self-care, especially for their mental health. Having this sense of cultural obligation to be strong and pray about it seemed to be a problem for some, but helpful to others. This idea of praying about their issues does come from a cultural background where all they had was religion to depend on to get them through historically racist and discriminatory obstacles. What needs to be noted is that the participants were not bashing religion or praying, but they acknowledged that during their times of struggle they needed more assistance, yet and they did not receive it from family, friends or their universities.
Conclusion

Five major findings emerged from this project. The first finding centers on the expectation that these women were supposed to “push through,” “endure,” and “deal with it.” Throughout most of the interviews conducted, and across multiple interviews and multiple participants, the word “endure” or the phrases “push through it” and “deal with it” emerged as explicit messages they were given when faced with situations involving stress, racism, discrimination, and mental health. The second finding that emerged is the lack of support participants felt they received from the institutions that they were attending and even from their own families while they were in college. The third finding pertains to the microaggressions that the participants experienced while enrolled in their programs. The participants felt that the microaggressions that they experienced had a major impact on the level of stress that they endured which impacted their health in various ways. The fourth finding comes from the participants feeling that they were being viewed as “the representative” of the Black race while in school. This dictated how they acted or “presented” themselves both in and out of the classroom. The fifth and final finding pertains to self-care or the lack thereof for the participants while in school. This also led to yet another phrase to arise: “pray about it,” especially when it came to how they dealt with mental health issues.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The aim in this study was to better understand the influence of educational attainment on Black women’s perceptions of their health. As such, the purpose of this project is to add to the literature by exploring Black women’s perceptions of health and well-being in relationship to their levels of education. For this project, I interviewed 15 Black women in the Midwest region. The primary questions that I set out to answer were: What are Black women’s perceptions regarding their health during their journey of educational attainment? How did Black women perceive racism contributing to their health during their educational journey in higher education? My first research question focused on subgroups such as barriers, conflicts, experiences of racism and prejudice, levels of stress and overall health of Black women. My research questions also focused on the perceptions of racism Black women faced in pursuit of their education and how those experiences mediated their perceptions of health.

In interviewing these participants, five major findings emerged from this narrative inquiry study. The first finding centers on the expectation that these women were supposed to “push through,” “endure,” and “deal with it.” Throughout most of the interviews conducted, and across multiple interviews and multiple participants, the word “endure” or the phrases “push through it” and “deal with it” emerged as explicit messages they were given when faced with situations involving stress, racism, discrimination, and mental health. The second finding that emerged is the lack of support participants felt they received from the institutions that they
where attending and even from their own families while they were in college. The third finding pertains to the microaggressions that the participants experienced while enrolled in their programs. The participants felt that the microaggressions that they experienced had a major impact on the level of stress that they endured, which impacted their health in various ways. The fourth finding comes from the participants feeling that they were being viewed as “the representative” of the Black race while in school. At times it coincided with microaggressions. This dictated how they acted or “presented” themselves both in and out of the classroom. The fifth and final finding pertains to self-care or the lack thereof for the participants while in school. This also led to yet another phrase to arise: “pray about it,” especially when it came to dealing with mental health issues.

The following section analyzes and discusses each finding in relationship to the theoretical framework, Black feminist thought (BFT), that undergirds this project. In addition, the section below discusses findings in relationship to existing literature within the field of higher education. This project concludes with a recommendations section that discusses needed steps institutions of higher education must take to better support Black women’s education and health.

**Discussion**

Importantly, Black women have had to navigate through racism and discrimination-based experiences throughout their college careers that cause feelings of isolation and higher stress levels than their White counterparts (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014; Gardner & Holley, 2011). Many Black women have experienced microaggressive forms of discrimination throughout their college careers that send messages of inferiority based on historically negative stereotypes (Cole, 2009; O’Connor, 2003; Settles, 2006; Sue, 2010; Williams & Nichols, 2012).
Historically, Black women’s voices have been constantly silenced, especially within the realm of education. Society does not acknowledge the suffering that Black women face within education. It is important to study gender in response to discriminatory experiences to understand the ramifications it has on health, education and socioeconomic status (SES) for Black people. According to Banks, Kohn-Wood, and Spencer (2006), the examination of gender as a moderator will help illuminate the intersections of gender, mental health and discrimination. Black women have unique experiences that are shaped by race and gender. Black women have constantly reported subtle forms of racism, discrimination, sexism and isolation in pursuit of educational attainment. Often, the result of these various barriers is disengagement from the pursuit of educational attainment (Shavers & Moore, 2014).

“Push through it,” “Endure,” or “Deal with it”

The first finding that emerged from participants’ interviews is the overwhelming experience these women had regarding the “push through” and/or “deal with it” mantra. Women who were interviewed used the word “endure” or the phrases “push through” and “deal with it” to describe how they were expected to cope with experiences of racism, stress, isolation and/or lack of support they received from their institutions as well as families. These terms were also used to describe how some of the participants dealt with their mental health. For example, when I asked Carmen how she dealt with issues regarding her health, she said, “I put my head down and push through it.” Carmen felt like she had no other choice due to the lack of resources that were provided for her at her university and the lack of support that she received in general.

The definition of the word “endure” means to suffer (something painful or difficult) patiently. Specifically, the words, phrases, and advice these women were given were not to
fracture systems that were oppressive, racist, and/or painful; instead, they were advised to merely patiently endure these systems. This ideology is connected to the minority stress theory because the participants are a marginalized group that face high levels of stress from being constantly oppressed and discriminated against. Based on the minority stress theory, these high levels of stress can have adverse health effects such as high blood pressure and anxiety (Myer, 2007). Participants in their interviews described suffering through experiences of racism, discrimination, isolation, and high levels of stress in order to move forward with their education; however, often it came at the cost of their mental and physical health.

These women were explicitly told to push through their barriers and challenges, often times with little or no help and support. As Bell (2009) suggested, Black women have been socialized to believe that they must be strong and full of self-sacrifice to be a successful wife, mother and businesswoman. Similarly, participants in this study felt they had to endure to be successful in their education. They were expected to be strong and self-sacrifice in order to be successful. This idea is seen throughout many of these women’s narratives, for example, when Sasha talked about her work and voice being ignored within a group project in one of her classes. She said, “Even though I was hurt by it I felt like I had to endure it because at the end of the day the world isn't all Black.” This thought process coincides with BFT because it acknowledges that Black women’s perspectives on oppression differ based upon their experiences. All of the participants had their own perspectives on the experiences of oppression and discrimination that they faced, and they needed to be acknowledged in order to understand Back women’s struggle within academia.

This was also seen when Tamika discussed what Black women are taught and the “expectations that are placed upon I think a Black woman is where it's ‘I can't show you
weakness, cause weakness or vulnerability is weak.’ I have to like, keep going, keep pushing. Although I'm like killing myself on the inside.” These women were expected to sacrifice their well-being, to “push through,” and to endure simply to get their education. In turn, these experiences of expectations that they endure, with little or no resources, ultimately created unnecessary stress on their mental and physical health. What is more, these women received few resources to help support the stress and physical health they endured.

This expectation of patiently enduring racist and/or sexist systems is discussed by Shavers and Moore (2014). The authors use the term “double-edge sword” to describe the coping mechanisms that the women in the study described to combat the feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction at PWIs. The authors discussed that Black women must choose persisting academically at the expense of their overall well-being. The mindset to persist or push forward no matter what is beneficial for Black women achieving academic success. However, it can be detrimental to other parts of their lives such as mental and physical health, hence the double-edge sword. The findings within the article, as well as within this project, suggest that Black women are expected to handle a different level of tolerance when it comes to stress and strife. Instead of providing resources to the participants, they were told to deal with their trauma, only make sure to deal with it patiently and silently as not to disrupt the higher education institutional norms of or ideologies of a Black college student. As Trina shared, it was “unnecessary stress,” and indeed it was because this oppressive behavior can be eliminated if institutions of higher education catered to the needs of Black women, just as much as they do for their White counterparts.

**Loneliness and Lack of Support**

The second finding that emerged is that of loneliness and lack of support these women endured. Specifically, this finding focuses on experiences where the participants felt lonely,
isolated and/or not supported, whether that be from their institutions of higher education or their families. Several of the participants talked about feelings of isolation due to them not feeling as if they were being supported. For example, Carmen could not talk to her husband about school because it was a sensitive subject matter for him. This is an example of gender superiority because it made her husband feel as though he was lacking something, since Carmen was achieving a higher level of education than he was. Carmen had to suppress her feelings and achievements toward higher education to make her husband feel secure within his role as a man and provider within the household.

Moreover, Trina and Karla provided examples of how they were ignored or belittled by professors when they sought support from them. These experiences created high levels of stress, self-doubt, isolation, and loneliness. These feelings are not conducive to a stable learning environment. It caused some of the participants to disengage with their studies and their eagerness to learn. More importantly, it had a major impact on their mental and physical health. They both felt discouraged about continuing their education and even experienced moments of being physically sick due to the high levels of stress they experienced while in school.

Connecting minority stress theory to this theme, we can look at the distal stress process. Distal process for minority groups is associated with prejudice and discrimination (Dohrenwend, 2000). The participants within the study were discriminated against by professionals within the academic setting that as a result created multiple stressors for the participants which they had to face with little to no support.

Based on previous studies, Black women have had to navigate through racism and discrimination-based experiences throughout their college careers that cause feelings of isolation and higher stress levels than their White counterparts (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014;
Gardner & Holley, 2011). The authors state that Black women in higher education have to deal with issues that are related to racism and discrimination that their White counterparts do not have to worry about.

As stated throughout the findings, most of the participants reported that they began to feel like no one cared about their needs or well-being and this caused them to feel isolated, which increased their level of stress. For example, Olivia stated “Looking back at it that there would have been times where I felt depressed. Just mental health-less. I didn't feel good about who I was or where I'm at. I'm just here and I've got to hang on.” No student should have to feel like they are just “hanging on” within an environment with multiple professionals who should have been there to guide and help them so that they can be successful students. Her invisibility connects with Black feminist thought (BFT) regarding feeling like an outsider-within. Based on the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1989), a subordinate group not only experiences a different reality, but they also interpret that reality in a different way from the dominant group. Through the lens of BFT, Black women have a tool of resistance to our various forms of subordination. It also provides a standpoint that is self-defined for Black women in order to resist their domination and allows for their voices to be heard. There is a system set in place that consistently oppresses Black women in order to further the racist White cultures agenda of power and privilege.

Another aspect within this finding is that the participants reported feelings of self-doubt and/or feelings of imposter syndrome. The imposter phenomenon comes from internal feelings of intellectual phoniness by minorities (Clance & Imes, 1978; Ewing et al., 1996). As it relates to Black women, imposters think about their level of ability in relation to others, specifically their White counterparts, and are uncertain about their ability to be successful (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). According to Bernard, Hoggard and Neblett (2018), racially driven experiences give rise
to feelings of the impostor phenomenon because they invoke a sense of “otherness” or feeling like an outsider, which makes minorities question their intellectual competence. This can be seen in the case of Karla, who spoke about her difficulties with adjusting to the pace of graduate school. She started to question whether or not she belonged there after being ignored by her professor, whom she thought would have given her more support. She began to question whether she was smart enough, which triggered high levels of stress and depression. This is a prime example of the impostor syndrome and the ramifications behind it for Black women who are not supported by their institutions.

According to Peteet, Montgomery and Weekes (2015), these intense feelings of self-doubt and lack of confidence in academic ability can interfere with the academic development of underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities, which causes them to disengage academically (i.e., stop attending class), have constant feelings of inadequacy, and exhibit an unhealthy pressure to succeed. Smith and Lalonde (2003) also stated that inequities in school often cause Black students stress and cause them to disengage from the educational process. There were several participants who reported that they responded in that exact same way when they did not get the support they needed or experienced stressful environments at their institutions. Trina, Karla, Justine, and Melanie are just some of the participants who felt that their ability to be a successful student was impacted by trauma they endured from their peers and professors. Trina’s enthusiasm for higher education has diminished, Karla had a different perspective on graduate school and the relationship that she had with her previous professor, Justine and Melanie are both stressed over their ability to strive and be successful within their respective programs. Carmen even considered taking a break because she was not motivated due to the lack of support that she got in graduate school. If the academic environment continues to be sexist and discriminatory for
Black women there will be a continued decrease in retention rates for this particular group. Why would anyone pay and stay somewhere they are not supported?

**Microaggressions**

The third finding that emerged from participants is that of microaggressions and the impact that they had on the participants and their education. Here, “microaggressions” are operationalized as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue, 2010). Franklin (2019) states that microaggressions attack race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, and surname. Franklin (2019) reports that racial microaggressions exhaust the student and they are not able to perform well academically. Importantly, Smith, Yosso, and Solorzano (2006) cite that the stress that is associated with microaggressions causes African Americans high levels of strain on their mental, physical and emotional health.

Many of the participants reported experiencing microaggressions in the classroom. Many of these statements were seen as subtle forms of racism and discrimination by the participants and caused a tremendous level of discomfort and distraction within the classroom for the participants. For example, when Trina described how her professor had the White students in class watch her and other Black classmates’ interactions with each other and listen to their dialogue, she felt like she was on a television network, Animal Planet. In that moment, she felt that she had been stripped of her human rights and made to feel less than others. It was a major distraction for her and her fellow classmates because they had to process what had just taken place in the class; then she thought about several ways that the professor could have done things differently. It added an extra level of stress for her because, as she had stated previously,
situations like this take away from her time of learning in the class, and in the time that it takes her to regain her composure and refocus, she has missed out on pertinent information. So she then becomes more stressed because she feels like she has to catch up.

This finding aligns with the literature that discusses the damaging effects of microaggressions. Many Black women have experienced microaggressive forms of discrimination throughout their college careers that send messages of inferiority based on historically negative stereotypes (Cole, 2009; O’Connor, 2003; Settles, 2006; Sue, 2010; Williams & Nichols, 2012). Tuitt (2010) also stated that the discriminatory and racist experiences can ultimately have an impact on Black students’ learning experience in the classroom because it can make them feel like they are invisible and their voice is not being heard. Many of the experiences that participants reported made them feel like they had no voice or no other choice than to accept the racist and/or sexist things that were said to them in the classroom. This theme can also be connected to BFT’s “outsider-within” term to describe how the participants maintained a position as an outsider within an oppressive environment. This caused a level of stress that caused some of the participants anxiety that changed their eating habits and physical activity due to feelings of depression. Studies have shown that the lack of educational attainment and retention for Black women can be related to prejudices and discrimination that they experience both inside and outside of the educational system (Gay, 2004). This statement also coincides with some of the participants feeling like they cannot continue with their education because of the amount of stress that they develop from dealing with microaggressions in the classroom from their peers and professors.

What is important to note is that even though the participants experienced multiple forms of microaggressions, they chose not to respond out of fear that they would end up suffering the
consequences of their White peers, faculty, and administrators’ actions or statements. Some participants specifically stated that they refrain from addressing the issue because they knew that their White peers would just cry, and then they would become the victim. Evans and Moore and DiAngelo (cited in Quaye et al., 2019) talked about “emotional labor” which people of color engage in to benefit White people by “managing their emotions, not expressing their anger as a means to protect White people’s feelings” (p. 97). This also means that the amount of time and energy people of color spend on “emotional labor” means less time spent on self-care, which is another finding that will be discussed.

**The Representative**

The fourth finding comes from the participants reporting that they constantly felt that they had to be “the representative” for the entire Black race and, for some participants, Black women. Here, “the representative” was a way of feeling tokenized. Specifically, participants discussed that they were made to feel that it was their job to represent an entire community of people. This tokenization and pressure to be “the representative” caused participants to act a certain way in the classroom setting or on campus in order to make sure that they did not give a “bad name” to the race. For example, when Olivia talked about the incident that occurred in the cafeteria, she said from that point forward she felt like she had to be a representative for her race and for Black women. She became critical of the way that she talked, how she dressed, and how she acted because she did not want to embarrass Black women or the Black community. Based on one incident, that did not directly involve her, she took on this responsibility based on the comment of one individual labeling the entire Black community. Once again, this created an unnecessary stress for Olivia because she felt like she was “always on” and could not be her
natural self. She sacrificed her own identity to make sure that her community was seen in a positive light.

These types of feelings of tokenization and being made to be “the representative” and the subsequent reactions from the participants can be related to the minority stress theory, specifically proximal stressors, a component to the theory. Dohrenwend (2000) discussed how minorities are at risk of conforming to a stereotype that has been placed on their specific group, more specifically for African Americans. Proximal stressors are internal feelings, so in the situation where the participants feel as though they are being watched, questioned, and expected to conform or act a certain way based on their race, it causes a certain level of anxiety and stress. Steele and Aronson (1995) also noted that when African Americans are reminded of their minority status within academics, they face a high level of anxiety which causes them to suffer academically. Melanie talked about how she felt like she had to represent for the entire Black race when she was in college. It had gotten so bad that she admittedly said she ran herself into the ground her freshmen year trying to be the “the representative.” She felt burned out trying to always be someone who was essentially perfect. She felt physically and mentally drained and had to figure out a way to recoup.

Importantly, there is a gap in the literature regarding how African Americans are faced with this “representative” responsibility inside of the academic institution. Literature discussing this topic is limited on how it specifically impacts African American women. There needs to be more research on the different stereotypes or burdens that are placed on Black women in the classroom. Most of the participants described that having this level of responsibility took away from their learning experience and made them feel as though they had to take on the role of teacher to their peers and professors. According to Hankin (2006), understanding the kinds of
motive, obstacles, frustrations, and supports that shape the experiences of Black women can help implement proper treatment for hypertension as well as other healthcare issues that Black women face. Black feminist thought (BFT) is encompassed within this theme because it focuses on experience and consciousness. Focusing on this theme, the participants felt they are, often times were, the representative for the Black race and for Black women, and it showed within their academic career by pushing themselves to their limits in order to be seen as successful.

**Self-Care: “Pray about it”**

The fifth and final finding from this project centers on the participants’ self-care or lack thereof, specifically when it came down to their mental health. Specifically, women were given explicit advice to engage in self-care by being told to “pray about it” or “pray it away” when talking about feelings of depression or the stress that they encountered at their institutions of higher education. For example, Justine talked about self-care as it relates to mental health and how it is taboo within the Black community to talk about seeking any type of help regarding your mental health. She acknowledged that instead of providing support and proper resources, Black women are told to “be strong” and to tap into their spirituality and “pray it away.” However, she needed more during her time of loss. By telling Black women to just “be strong” and “pray it away” you are ignoring their cry for help. Once again, their voices are not being heard and it causes a lot internal conflict when they do pray but their feelings of anxiety and depression do not go away. This mentality is creating a new set of trauma that Black women cannot get away from.

According to Harrell (2000), the stress process is a relevant framework for investigating mental health issues among people of color. Even though most of the women were facing life-changing events they still could not acknowledge that they needed to take care of their mental
health. It seemed as though they put everyone else’s needs or issues before their own. They had to manage their own mental health to assist everything and everyone else in their lives, without a proper outlet. McGee and Stovall (2015) stated that “the psychological and emotional energy required to manage stress in academic and social contexts as well as systemic and everyday racism can be overwhelming and taxing” (p.493). Some of them stated that they would not have known where to even start or did not understand what mental health was at that stage of their lives. However, most of them wished that they would have taken care of their mental health, and they would have been open to going to counseling if their educational institutions had provided a Black therapist.

Looking at this finding through the lens of BFT, Black women’s lives are shaped by their experiences and the things that they learn or are taught. As stated by Collins (2009), the realization of what we do and what we think will shape our lives and in turn filters through our work. Tying this statement to the idea of being strong and “praying it away,” the participants in this study have been taught through an oppressive system that they do not get the resources and help that their White counterparts may receive. Their only coping mechanisms are to be strong and “pray about it.” This is more of a survival mechanism within an oppressive society. These mechanisms have been taught and passed down from generations of Black women because they saw no other way to survive in a society dominated by racism, sexism, discrimination, and oppression. The participants are conflicted between receiving help for their mental health and upholding the ideas and cultural principles of what it means to be a Black woman in a society that has continuously beat them down mentally and physically. According to Harris (2006), African American women face double oppression due to their cultural markers of race and gender. The participants are oppressed by the lack of support they receive from family and
friends and by the institutions that they are attending due to their lack of acknowledgement that Black women need culturally appropriate resources to assist them with their mental health. Kimberley stated that she chose not to attend counseling sessions at her university because she had no one to relate to. She knew that she would feel a higher level of stress and oppression by having to explain her cultural norms and identity to someone she felt would never understand who she truly is.

**Recommendations**

**For Black Women**

Given these women’s racist and sexist experiences, and that these experiences mediated their educational journey, it is imperative that higher education institutions provide better resources to help support Black women in the academy. The first recommendation that emerges from this study is that institutions provide more opportunities that support Black women. Most, if not all, of the participants said that they did not feel included at the institutions they attended. Most of them felt that they did not or could not find any resources that would benefit them, especially the nontraditional students and the participants who had small children. Museus and Quaye (2009) discussed “cultural integrity” and how it is important for retention of minority students. They suggest programs and teaching strategies that focus on students’ racial/ethnic background in a positive manner to engage in/develop more relevant learning activities. This can happen if institutions of higher education speak with current students on ways of implementing these types of programs on campus. This information can be collected through roundtable discussions set up on campus between the faculty, administration, and students. There also needs to be follow-up set in place to make sure that these strategies are implemented within the classroom as well and to see if what is being put in place is actually beneficial to the students.
For example, both Tammy and Alexis said that they struggled as single parents when they went to college because everything was geared toward the traditional student. These institutions should provide parent support groups for Black women, and not just groups that are started by students. These should be groups that are funded through the institutions that are specifically for Black women who are parents in college. There should be a parent liaison or advisor who runs the support group. This advisor should provide resources (i.e., housing options, scholarships, job listings, daycare services) to the students who are in the support group. Everything within the support group should be geared toward the retention of this population. Museus (2008) conducted a study and found that ethnic student organizations helped to facilitate the adjustment for students of color into college by functioning as spaces that provide cultural familiarity, cultural advocacy and expression and cultural validation. As stated previously, Wilder (2013) stated that institutions of higher education were built on the backs of slaves. These institutions are still making millions off the backs of Black women without giving them one penny of the profit. It is time that these institutions pay what is owed to these women.

The second recommendation that emerges from this study is that there was a lack of faculty, staff, and students of color, specifically Black women, at these institutions. There was a clear disconnect regarding Black women who were on campus and the resources that they felt they had for mental health. The participants were not comfortable seeing a White therapist or counselor. As a result, they could not get their mental health needs met. Museus and Quaye (2009) found that racial/ethnic faculty can validate minority students’ cultural backgrounds and experiences, which decreases the cultural dissonance that students of color experience. Cultural differences can make or break a resource being utilized, and based on the opinions of a few of the women, they felt that they would not be able to connect with a White therapist. By not
providing faculty and staff of color, specifically Black women, on campus, these universities are allowing Black women’s voices to be silenced. Black women need just as much support because of the high levels of stress they develop living in a society that constantly oppresses and beats them down both mentally and physically because of their race and gender. Institutions of higher education could set hiring practices in place that are geared toward hiring Black faculty and staff and create policies that focus on faculty retention for Black women faculty and staff. Museus and Quaye (2009) focus on “cultural translators” that offer advice about the socialization process based on their own experiences. Essentially, these “cultural translators” could assist Black women in feeling welcomed on campus and could serve as a valuable support system for these students. If institutions focused on this type of recruitment for faculty and staff, specifically increasing the hiring rates of Black faculty and staff, then many of these institutions would see an increase in retention of this population.

For the Institutions

The third recommendation is centered on all institutions requiring all White faculty and staff and White students to be familiarized with inappropriate or offensive language toward women of color, specifically Black women. Further, it would be beneficial to make it a requirement for graduation for students to take a course for at least a semester on cultural sensitivity. Within the course the students would address certain topics such as racism, discrimination, microaggressions, and cultural competence on campus. It should also be incorporated into professional development of all faculty and staff. This recommendation can help alleviate some of the stress that is created in the class for Black women by microaggressive behavior that comes from their peers and professors. For example, Trina gave several examples of how she was not only traumatized by her peers’ microaggressive behavior, but her professors’
as well. They could not let go of the stereotypical ideology of what a Black woman should be and tried to place her in that category without trying to understand or acknowledge who she was as a person. Black women are tired of spending time and money in spaces where they are supposed to feel safe, but instead are continuously marginalized and devalued. Institutions can implement faculty development training that focuses on the same topics that would be discussed within the classes that the students would be required to attend. To increase the participation of faculty and staff involvement, the institutions can offer an incentive such as bonuses and/or credit towards promotion and tenure. Achieving this level of understanding can also help create culturally appropriate interventions and strategies that can potentially decrease health disparities among Black women.

**Future Research**

Shavers and Moore (2014) also suggested that there needs to be more research on emotional, social, mental and physical well-being of Black female students. While this project sought to explore how racism and sexism mediated these participants’ educational experiences and perceptions of their health, it became clear that further study is needed regarding perceptions of well-being, especially self-care. Specifically, there needs to be further examination of self-care and how it coincides with the superwoman or strong Black woman mentality. The participants talked about feeling like they have no other choice but to take on everything, and such, this notion of taking on everything, being infallible, and showing no weakness needs to be further explored.

Williams and Williams-Morris (2000) briefly discussed how stigmas and misconceptions around mental health can have an impact on how African Americans can be diagnosed. Within this study, it was acknowledged by many of the participants that their cultural beliefs
surrounding mental health impacted the way that they sought help or support for the mental health issues that they struggled with. Some of the women were told by family members to “stay strong” or “pray it away” in regard to their mental struggles. Often, your character or level of strength is questioned when you talk about mental health within Black culture. There needs to be further research on stigmas associated with mental health, specifically for Black women and how they choose to take care of their mental health.

**Implications as a Professional**

This study was fortunate enough to have a variety of participants from different backgrounds as far as where and when they went to school. The range of the participants attending college ranged from the 1970s to the present. Yet, I noticed that with five decades of Black women attending college and graduate school, nothing has changed. All of the participants experienced some form of racism, discrimination, lack of support, microaggressions, and high levels of unnecessary stress due to these issues. As a higher education professional, I would have thought that we would have made more progress. Specifically, I would have thought that the institutions would have made more progress in making Black women feel more supported on campus. Some would argue that the forms of racism and discrimination are no where near as blatant as they were in the 70s and earlier times. While that may be true, based on the experiences that were shared during the study, it seems as though the more subtle forms of racism and discrimination have just as much impact on Black women who are students today, if not greater.

Having a space where Black students, specifically the women, can be themselves and express themselves freely is important, especially on a college campus. The women within the study constantly stated that they enjoyed being able to talk about some of the issues that they
experienced without any level of judgment. As a component of BFT (self-definition), Collins (2002) stated that Black women are provided with the power to name their own reality. This power gives Black women the opportunity to tell their own stories, control images that are perceived about them, and reject the dominant group’s definition of Black women. I felt that the women within the study were given the opportunity to tell their stories in their own voices and that it was important to them. Institutions of higher education need to provide/open up more safer spaces on campus for Black women to express themselves. On a personal level, it was therapeutic for me because it gave me an opportunity to know that there are others who have had similar experiences as me regarding their educational attainment. It also was reaffirming to me that this type of study is needed to further the literature within academia and healthcare knowledge base about Black women in academia and how our lives, specifically our health, is impacted by institutional racism and discrimination.

**Conclusion**

Importantly, Quaye et al. (2019) stated that even though Black people are not responsible for the racism they experience, prioritizing their own self-care is essential for a healthy well-being. Part of that prioritization is, one, acknowledging that their mental health is important and needs to be taken care of, and two, seeking the proper resources to maintain a healthy mental state. For Black women to seek proper resources, they need the proper resources set up for them at their educational institutions (i.e. a Black therapist). There needs to be more research done on the impact of having a Black woman as a therapist or counselor at educational institutions and the impact it has on Black students, specifically the women. In the study done by Quaye et al. (2019), the participants said that as a form of self-care they took care of their bodies both
mentally and physically in order to help combat racial battle fatigue, which is the exhaustion people of color feel from repeated exposure to racism. So, the question becomes what happens to those people, specifically the participants from my study who do not practice self-care? Another thing that needs to be pointed out is that even though it is important for the participants to practice self-care, it is also equally as important for their White counterparts to take on the responsibility of eliminating their racist, sexist, and discriminatory behaviors.

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative inquiry study was to explore the influence of educational attainment on Black women’s perceptions of their health. Empirical research indicated the causes of stress and other health concerns pertaining to Black women are often rooted in racism and discrimination. However, there are few studies that have specifically researched the connection between educational attainment regarding receiving baccalaureate degrees or higher and how or if that has had an influence on Black women’s health. This study adds to the literature by exploring Black women’s perceptions of health and well-being in relationship to their levels of education. This study used a qualitative approach, specifically using the methodology of narrative inquiry. By using narrative inquiry, the participants were able to tell their own stories about their experiences in college. All of the women experienced different forms of racism and discrimination. None of the women felt completely supported by the institution that they were attending, which brought on a higher level of stress and self-doubt about their abilities to be a successful student. Due to the high amounts of emotional labor that the participants were experiencing, the majority of the participants did not take care of their mental health. The findings indicate that there needs to be more work done within the educational institution regarding the support of Black women. There needs to be safe spaces on campus for these women to talk about their issues, there needs to be more counselors or
therapists of color at institutions, and there needs to be strategies set in place to alleviate the high amounts of racism and discrimination that this particular group encounters inside and outside of the classroom, such as cultural competency classes for both students and staff who are White.
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