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Eat Glass and Walk on Fire, While Managing A Pandemic: A Narrative Study of African American Women Who Serve as Chief Housing officers

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ABSTRACT

EAT GLASS AND WALK ON FIRE, WHILE MANAGING A PANDEMIC: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WHO SERVE AS CHIEF HOUSING OFFICERS

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Northern Illinois University, 2022
Dr. Gudrun Nyunt, Director

Creating uncertainty and stress, the COVID-19 pandemic and increased attention on racial relations, drastically changed how higher education and student affairs operated. For African American women, combatting racism and sexism has always been a daily occurrence in their professional and personal life but the pandemic heightened the challenges African American women had to overcome. This narrative inquiry study explored the lived experiences of African American women who were serving as Chief Housing Officers at Predominately White Institutions during the first 18-months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings highlight how the intersection of sexism and racism shaped the lived experiences of the African American women participants. Participants encountered barriers when striving to lead authentically while feeling pressure to succeed in managing pandemic-related challenges, not only for their department but their institutions. Participants felt compelled to serve as voices for communities of color on their campuses while dealing with racism and sexism in their everyday professional lives. These experiences forced participants to re-evaluate how they were presenting at home and at work.
EAT GLASS AND WALK ON FIRE, WHILE MANAGING A PANDEMIC: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WHO SERVE AS CHIEF HOUSING OFFICERS

BY

VALRONICA M. SCALES
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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:
Dr. Gudrun Nyunt
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Helen M. Scales. Thank you for always encouraging, inspiring and believing in me.
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PREFACE

INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION OF PRACTICE

The dissertation of practice is a scholarly endeavor that explores a complex problem of practice embedded in the work of a professional practitioner (Perry, 2015). The purpose of the dissertation of practice is to prepare students to become scholar practitioners, who use practical research and applied theories to improve their practice while contributing to the knowledge base in the field of higher education and student affairs. Eat Glass and Walk on Fire, While Managing a Pandemic: A Narrative Study of African American Women Who Serve as Chief Housing Officers zooms in on the lived experiences of the participants over an 18-month period. During that time, participants juggled the COVID-19-19 pandemic, heated racial debates during the election and the trauma of police brutality while leading not only their department, but also large divisional or institutional initiatives.

The dissertation of practice consists of three artifacts: (a) The dissertation of practice research proposal (Chapter 1): The purpose of this chapter is to showcase the proposal that guided the research. Students submit this proposal to their dissertation committee prior to starting their research project. Chapter 1 highlights the leadership roles and other positions African American women absorb in their roles. Also highlighted are the barriers African American women often face in the workplace and the experiences of these women in Higher Education and Student Affairs. Finally, Chapter 1 asks how race and gender and the intersections of race and gender influence African American women’s experiences as Chief Housing Officers. (b) A
manuscript for a scholarly publication (Chapter 2): Based on their dissertation research, students develop a manuscript that could be published in a scholarly journal in their field. Students select a potential journal and gear their manuscript toward that venue. While not required, students are encouraged to submit their manuscript to the journal for publication after successfully defending their dissertation. Chapter 2 focuses on the composite narrative of the four participants and their lived experiences during the 18-month period. Findings highlight the pressure participants felt to not fail; be a voice for students and staff of color in majority white spaces; and the racial battle fatigue participants experienced. Finally, findings also discuss the impact the 18-month period had on participants, and their need to find balance in their lives. Recommendations for future practice are also shared. (c) A scholarly reflection (Chapter 3): In the final chapter, students reflect on the dissertation process and discuss applications of the projects and newly gained skills to their professional practice and future engagement in research. Chapter 3 highlights the research and writing process for the author. The final chapter also shares the impact the pandemic and racial reckoning had on her and highlights her reasoning for leaving Higher Education and Student Affairs after a 17-year career.
CHAPTER 1

DISSERTATION OF PRACTICE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Introduction

For much of recorded history, women were generally excluded from positions of leadership (Beard, 1915, 2000; Goethals & Hoyt, 2017; Reagle & Rhue, 2011). Women experience less preparation for advancement into upper leadership and endure gender discrimination in the workplace in addition to being underpaid and underrepresented in higher education careers (Hannum et al., 2015; Probert, 2005; Redmond et al., 2016; Wallace & Marchant, 2009). In fact, women have traditionally received less preparation for upward mobility and have been described as having less human capital for their employers than their men counterparts (Probert, 2005).

African American women have faced barriers in their careers not only due to gender but also race, and the intersections of race and gender (Davis & Maldona, 2015; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Simpson, 2001). While African American women have become increasingly equipped with appropriate educational credentials over the past 20 years, they have continued to struggle to advance to senior administrative roles in higher education (Hamilton, 2004). In 1980, Myrtis Hall Mosley reported that educational organizations often hid the disgraceful condition of African American women in higher education by either ignoring their plight or hiding them under categories of minorities, Blacks, or women (p. 308). Negative barriers and obstacles have
also been found to lead to a lack of performance excellence and retention in leadership roles at predominately White institutions (Mosley, 1980). Over 20 years later, in 2001, Simpson reflected on African American women in academic administrative positions, stating that “Our numbers are low but our triumphs sizable and we realize that the telling and passing of our stories and learned strategies are essential for our own survival and for those preparing to follow in our footsteps” (p. 5). Several years later, Jean-Marie, Williams and Sherman (2009), reported that, African American women must transcend racial and gender stereotypes and disrupt the “isms” while continuing to construct their own leadership style. But in spite of triumphs and advancements over the years, in 2015, Davis and Maldonado still found that the leadership development and career trajectories of African American women in higher education continue to be informed and impacted by race, gender, and the intersections of race and gender.

Research shows that an individual in a position that holds a certain measure of power or authority is generally associated with leadership and wields influence within an organization (Harper, 2018). Yet, in predominately White organizations, gender and race tend to restrict the opportunities for leadership, especially for African American women. In fact, influence and power often restrict African American women’s authority and leadership (Slaughter, 2015). Specifically, privilege is often used to circumvent, diminish, overrule, and control the actions of African Americans in the workplace (Deitch et al., 2003), especially by their White counterparts. African Americans in leadership roles are subject to having their authority questioned and undermined. Leadership roles are beyond the customary expectations for African American women in predominantly White organizations (King & Ferguson, 1996), which leads to ambiguity when African American women are in leadership positions. Though the number of
African American women leaders in predominantly White organizations is increasing, the socially constructed hierarchies of race, gender, and the intersection of race and gender continue to disempower the process of leadership (Byrd, 2009; Collins, 1999).

This past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed how higher education institutions operate (Chronicle Staff, 2020) and created additional stress and uncertainty as well as fears about health and safety for student affairs staff (Anderson, 2020). In addition to the pandemic, the United States also experienced increased attention for the Black Lives Matter movement after several murders of Black individuals – men and women – by police in 2020 as well as a highly contested presidential election in fall 2020. Communities of color have been hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic (Fortuna et al., 2020). African American women, due to systemic oppression and marginalization related to gender, race, and the intersections of race and gender, are particularly vulnerable and susceptible to adverse health conditions due to COVID-19-19 (Chandler et al., 2021) and have encountered increased discrimination over the past year (Ruiz et al., 2020). In response, researchers and scholars have called for collective action against anti-Blackness and liberal White supremacy in academia, focusing particularly on the experiences of African American faculty and students (Bell et al., 2020). To support these calls, more research is needed on the experiences of African Americans in various areas of academia, including the experiences of African American women in senior leadership positions in departments of Housing and Residential Life at predominately White institutions during these challenging times.
Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to explore the lived experiences of African American women in Chief Housing Officer roles at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). This study strives to bring voice to African American women’s unique leadership experiences in student affairs administration focusing on the ways that race and gender, and the intersection of race and gender, shape their experiences, specifically focusing on the past 18-month period.

1. How do race and gender and the intersections of race and gender influence the experiences of African American women in Chief Housing Officer roles at PWIs?
   a. What personal and/or professional contexts, if any, must African American women in Chief Housing Officer roles navigate during their tenure as a leader in the present and future, over the last 18-months?
   b. How have current events (i.e., COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter Movement, contested presidential election) intersected with race and gender to shape participants’ experiences as senior leaders in Housing and Residence Life at PWIs?

2. How have race and gender, and the intersections of race and gender influenced these African American women’s career trajectories?
   a. What barriers and challenges, related to their race and gender and intersection of race and gender, have they navigated during this time period?
   b. What assets and supports, related to their race and gender and intersection of race and gender, have they utilized in their personal and professional lives?
Literature Review and Guiding Framework

Regardless of research on the effective, developmental, and collaborative nature of women leaders, research shows that employees prefer men leaders (Eagly, 2007). Women are less likely to be promoted into leadership roles than men; women are less likely to be seen as effective leaders than men, and leadership obstacles are more prevalent for women of color than for White women or for men (Eagly & Carli, 2009; Griffiths, 2012; Holvino & Blake-Beard, 2004, Sanchez-Hueles & Davis, 2010). Salary disparities, gender discrimination, less representation in upper leadership, and less preparation for career advancement, suggests the marginalization of women at work in higher education careers. In spite of the unique challenges women and, in particular, women of color, face in leadership roles, women have been historically neglected in this area of research and theory development while men in leadership positions have been studied rather extensively (Chemers, 1997; DeWitt, 2016; Hill et al., 2016). This study builds on literature about the unique experiences of women, in general, and African American women as they strive to advance and serve in leadership roles in the workplace.

Barriers to Advancement in the Workplace

Women who strive to advance in the workplace often encounter what has been referred to as the “glass ceiling” (Morrison et al., 1987). The term “glass ceiling” was first used by A. M. Morrison (1987) in an article which examined the lack of women in business leadership positions
like CEOs or chairmen, despite their representation in the workforce. The transparent or glass barrier may not have been visible at the start of a woman’s careers but ultimately blocked advancement in their salary and career (Hindle, 2008).

Women’s experiences and advancement in the workplace is also often influenced by stereotypes their co-workers may hold. Stereotypes, in particular, affect women and women of color in leadership roles due to their influence on perceptions and their elicitation of stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995). According to Steele and Aronson (1995), “stereotype threat usually occurs when one cares about a domain (e.g., one wishes to be an effective leader), one knows that a stereotype about the group of which one is a member can provide an explanation for poor performance in this domain (e.g., women are expected by others to be less effective as leaders), and this stereotype is made salient in a situation requiring performance” (p.798).

Stereotype threat occurs more often with difficult tasks, during evaluations and performance reviews, and when the task is a high priority. Stereotype threat effects have been demonstrated for race (Steele & Aronson, 1995), social class (Croizet & Claire, 1998), and gender (Spencer et al., 1999). Stereotype threat could play a substantial influence on the number of women in leadership, although little research has examined the influence of stereotype threat in the workplace (Sackett et al., 2001; Steele & Davies, 2003).

African American women potentially experience larger negative stereotypes as a result of being a woman and African American (Hoyt, 2007). African American women often experience lower promotion rates, and occupational job segregation; they are more likely to experience unfair treatment in training and advancement, disengagement, discrimination, prejudice, and lack
of psychosocial and instrumental support (Bova, 2000). These work experiences habitually reduce access to professional networks for African American women leaders.

When women and people of color are promoted to leadership positions in higher education administration, they are more likely to be promoted to risky or precarious leadership positions than White men, meaning that they may be set-up for failure by being placed at unstable institutions and positions (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). This theory is known as the glass cliff framework (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; McGee, 2017, Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Attached to the glass cliffs are generally additional challenges based on the leader’s race and/or gender identity. For example, in a study that focused on Black presidents at PWIs, both men and women participants shared that their race and, for women participants, gender served as a challenge and impediment throughout their career due to differential treatment compared to their White or men colleagues, higher standards, and increased scrutiny regarding their abilities (McGee, 2017).

Serving in Leadership Roles at Work

According to Crenshaw (1989), many of the experiences that African American women face in predominantly White organizations are not solely located within separate spheres of race, gender, or social class. These domains converge forming structural and political aspects of individual experiences not captured within mainstream leadership discussion. This interlocking system often intersects with the presumed right of the African American woman leader to exercise power and influence. Collins (1998) refers to African American women as being
outsiders-within – a status of disempowerment within interactive systems of power, race, gender, and social class. Within this pattern of masculine leadership, women may have to align their leadership style to one that violates expectations of femininity, which often leads to harsh criticism from supervisees (Breithaupt, 2015; Enke, 2014; Jablonski, 2000).

The dominant model for leadership is too often shaped around Whiteness and the traditional concepts of masculine behavior expectations (Enke, 2014; Nidiffer, 2001). Gender discrimination for women in leadership is important to review to understand the challenges for women leaders, and how they are perceived in leadership roles. Women of color often face additional forms of discrimination in the workplace that other colleagues, specifically White women, may escape (Sanchez-Hucles, & Davis, 2010). In fact, it is well documented that women of color receive lower pay than White men, White women, and men of color (Collins, 2002). African American, Asian American, and Latino men and women are more likely to experience covert discrimination and subtle prejudice leading to outgroup status and experience occupational segregation as a result, but women of color also carry the burden of racism and sexism combined (Browne & Askew, 2006; Combs, 2003; Hyun, 2005; Leung & Gupta, 2007).

In addition to dealing with prejudice and discrimination, Holvino and Blake-Beard (2004) note that women of color learn to maintain a positive self-image when confronted with “micro aggressions” that could halt promotions, mentoring, and success.

African American women leaders in educational leadership and organizational leadership regularly confront bias and discriminations when exercising their leadership authority (Parker, 2005). Organizational leadership refers to the practice of leadership within a context where individuals are held to norms, values, and beliefs of the organization’s culture (Parker, 2001). An
organization’s culture is often justified through norms and values and perceived through underlying assumptions of people within the organization (Schein, 1992).

One of the many underlying assumptions of members within an organization is that leaders look, act, and think in ways that reflect the culture of the organization (Parker, 2001). This expectation, however, may be in conflict with the stereotypical assumptions about African American women when “White, middle-class cultural values and beliefs are the norm to which organizational members are expected to adapt” (Parker, 2001, p. 45). White men may dominate the organizational culture in U. S. organizations, yet they have been slow to acknowledge the possibility that racist and sexist structures are intentionally maintained for the purpose of power and privilege (Ross-Gordon & Brooks, 2004).

The double-edged sword of race and gender cuts deep. African American women in management report “racism rather than sexism, as the greater barrier to opportunity in dominant culture organizations” (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996, p. 197). Acts of bias are often overt and sometimes subtle, leading to frustration and confusion, leaving African American women negotiating the process of leadership within a predominantly White organization’s culture; often times by adapting to the norm or by offering new ideas and greater options for leading based on the multiple perspectives they bring to the leadership experience (Parker, 2001).

African American women in both organizational and educational leadership settings report encounters where their authority is constantly scrutinized or questioned. These encounters are disempowering, and the lack of social networks means African American women lack access to certain information (Parker, 2001). African American women often also undergo challenging situations, trial periods and must have their qualifications validated before they are accepted into
their roles (Byrd, 2008, Stoke, 1996). Both race and gender are perceived to be associated with these encounters.

The growth and advancement of African American women into what has characteristically been an area dominated by White men (Kellerman et al., 2007; Kulik & Metz, 2015) remains relevantly connected to conversations regarding the need to increase diversity within leadership spheres. African American women in positions of leadership in predominantly White organizations shoulder the increasing challenges of the effects of race, gender, and social class in addition to the combination of power and influence in relation to one’s personal experience and leadership (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Research on marginalized leaders who may be challenged in their exercise of leadership in predominantly white organizations is lacking in spite of researchers having studied leadership of a diverse workforce (Waters, 1992; Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

Women, and women of color in particular, should serve in leadership capacities (Gupton, 2009; Hill et al., 2016; Prime et al., 2009). It is necessary to address matters such as leadership cultures and philosophies considering the remnant and pervasive imbalances that exist and hinder African American women from reaching and succeeding in these roles (Helm, 2016; Reeves & Guyot, 2017). Rhode (2017) cites such factors as generational inequality, unconscious bias, in-group favoritism, and inhospitable cultures as obstacles that currently exist within many leadership spheres. Confronting these factors is paramount, if progress is to be made in addressing the race and gender leadership gap.
Authentic Leadership

The notion of leadership has been traditionally fixed on images of middle-class White men, and more recently White women, as the leader, particularly in Western culture (Parker, 2005). The image of African American women in positions of power and authority distorts this fixed image (Parker, 2005). As a result, the dominant perception of who is best fit to lead tends to grant power and privilege to certain groups (White men), while restricting others (African American women). The dominant perspective that frames our understanding of the power and authority of a leader in organizations is competitive and distant, a perspective.

Women of color striving to lead authentically in predominantly White spaces, often face two socially constructed marginalized identities. Authentic leadership is defined as knowing who you are and being yourself as a leader, openly and consistently (Eagly, 2005). It is difficult for women to enact leadership authentically, because organizations are usually shaped to fit men, more than women, whether consciously or unconsciously (Breithaupt, 2015; Saint-Michel & Petit, 2015). Authenticity for leaders with multiple marginalized identities means living, “moment-to-moment (with) negotiations and decisions about managing who we are, given the context” (Jones, Kim, & Skendall, 2012, p. 711). When gender intersects with additional social identities, like race, being an authentic leader in that organization becomes riddled with further complications (Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017). Despite being presumed incompetent by their White and men colleagues (Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017; Patton, 2009), women of color leaders have named that their marginality allows them to be resourceful, creative advocates for themselves and others who hold marginalized identities.
Similar to their peers in other workplaces, women of color in leadership roles in student affairs who strive to lead authentically frequently face the additional burden of navigating their identities in the predominantly White and masculine spaces of academia. Enke’s (2014) study of conceptions of power amongst (mostly White) women Senior Student Affairs Officers confirms that leadership is a mostly gendered process. If leadership in student affairs can be a gendered process, it is likely to be a gendered and racialized process for women of color (Lomax Wardell, 2010; Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017). Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2017) recognize that authentic leaders tend to focus on the multiple lenses and the intersection of identities of ones lived experiences; reconfiguring their identities as they challenge the status quo, known as tempered radicals.

Tempered radical leaders often have differing social identities and values and often find themselves at odds with the dominant culture. Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2017) note that “This is our chosen response to the challenge of leading authentically as Black immigrant women leaders in predominantly White institutional contexts” (p. 403). The experiences of the women of color participants in Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2017) study, suggest the need for institutions to engage in intentional diversity and inclusion actions that include cultural audits, diversity and inclusion training workshops, the creation of homogenous and cross-cultural communities, and leadership development for women and people of color.
Support Networks and Mentorship

Representational leadership is important to leaders who are women, specifically for those searching for mentors, sponsors, confidants, and role models. Griffiths (2012) compared the organizational cultures and personal resilience of women leaders in higher education at an older institution and a newer institution. Women at the newer institution believed they experienced lesser effects of the "glass ceiling" because they saw more women in senior leadership roles who served as support systems than their colleagues at the older institution.

Support networks are a critical and vital component to success for African American women who work in predominately White environments (Watson, 2001). African American women often utilize support networks, which include mentor relationships to provide assistance, guidance, career support, and informal support. Holistic support networks of African American administrators in higher education are critical for personal and professional development as they move through workplace culture (Watson, 2001). These networks are vital to the success and survival of African American women.

The role of the mentor is to support, advise, open doors for career growth and “show the rope” to their mentees (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Jackson & Flowers, 2003; Johnsrud, 1990; Nichols & Tanksley, 2004; Penny & Gaillard, 2006; Searby & Tripses, 2006). As Johnsrud (1990) states, “There is probably no other single relationship that can be as instrumental in enhancing an administrative career in higher education than a quality mentoring relationship” (p. 59). The lack of mentors available to African American women, due to the minimal number of women at mid-level or senior administrative positions, is a barrier to their professional growth.
and success (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Holmes et al., 2007; Jackson & Harris, 2007; Nichols & Tanksley, 2004; Searby & Tripses, 2006). Crawford and Smith (2005) investigated the importance of mentoring African American women professionals. They found that African American women are placed in positions that are on the perimeter of an organization that have little guidance between the theory and theory-to-practice applicability. Mentoring could act as a catalyst to senior leadership roles for many African American women.

**Stress and Burn-out**

Women in leadership roles often juggle stress and exhaustion in addition to their many other roles. While women are mostly underrepresented in leadership roles, they are overrepresented in household leadership, meaning they often carry the major responsibilities for caring for dependents and managing household duties on top of their workplace responsibilities (Boushey, 2007; Dowdy & Hamilton, 2012; Mason & Goulden, 2004). There is a toll that comes with balancing career duties and other obligations at home that leads to burn-out and stress.

Workplace demands on women in middle and senior leadership positions on college campuses challenge their well-being and increase their stress (Kersh, 2018; Mayer et al., 2015). Extreme exhaustion has been cited as a challenging aspect of their roles for women who work in student affairs and are typically called on to deal with student emergencies or students in distress (Kersh, 2018). The exhaustion is negatively correlated with exercise and engagement in professional development activities and positively correlated with the number of evenings and weekends worked per semester. Burnout and lower rates of career persistence is due to the chronic stress and exhaustion women in student affairs face (Kersh, 2018). Despite the
pervasiveness of exhaustion linked to women’s experiences as student affairs administrators, some women in higher education prefer careers in student affairs because of the focus on values, holistic development and leadership cultivation (Kersh, 2018).

Experiences of African American Women in Higher Education and Student Affairs

Several studies have focused on African American women and their experiences within the field of Higher Education and Student Affairs (Henry, 2010; Johnson, 2019; West, 2015; Ralston, 2019). Many African American women reported that they believed their professional success was connected to the impact they were having at their places of employment (West, 2015). They also reported that, as African American women, they faced numerous issues that are related to being marginalized, isolated and underrepresented (West, 2015), which also led to being in positions that lacked influence, power, or the ability to enact change. In fact, many African American women expressed that they did not feel appreciated by the majority members in their workplace and had to regularly combat discrimination and stereotypes (Henry, 2010). Recommendations for improving the work environment for African American women in student affairs include increasing the amount of African American staff and creating supportive networks where faculty and staff can engage across campus and associations, which include mentor and mentee relationships.

Limited research has explored the experiences of African American women in leadership roles within the functional area of housing and residence life (for exceptions, see Myrich, 2020). Research on professionals in housing and residential life has typically focused on entry-level
professionals. Such studies highlighted concerns related to job satisfaction, burn-out, and retention of entry-level staff (Belch & Mueller, 2003; Davidson, 2012; Jones, 2001; Reed, 2015; St Ong et al., 2008). Scholars argue that responsibilities of residence life professionals have increased in complexity over the years, which has led to additional stressors (Shupp & Arminio, 2012).

This is, however, also true for senior leadership positions in housing and residential life. The Association of College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I), (2012), the primary professional association for housing and residential life in the United States, developed a list of core competencies for chief housing officers that includes competencies related to human resources and supervision, leadership, crisis management, academic initiatives and student learning, equity and inclusion, research and assessment, policy and legal issues, facilities management, fiscal resources, and control, just to name a few. African American women, who serve in senior leadership positions, thus have to navigate increasingly complex job responsibilities while also encountering barriers due to their gender, race, and the intersections of race and gender. Few African American women hold senior leadership positions in housing and residential life, thus leading to a lack of role models for African American women striving to obtain these types of positions. Thus, more research is needed to understand the experiences of African American women in senior leadership positions in housing and residence life.
I approach this study through an intersectional lens. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) coined the term “intersectionality”. Intersectionality was designed to explain and understand the numerous factors at play in the shaping and perpetuation of social inequities. Intersectionality contextualizes and allows for a mapping of the ways in which race intersects with gender, ethnicity, nationality, language, and other key categories connected to social existence, (in)equalities, and (in)equities. The intersectional experience is both interconnected and endless since all of these factors continuously overlap (Crenshaw, 1989). These overlapping elements, over the course of a lifetime, serve to shape a person’s experiences on an array of levels and in a myriad of capacities.

Intersectionality emerged from Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT was created by a group of scholars who studied legal polices and law who were concerned about racial suppression in society. CRT uses counter stories in the form of discussion, archives, and personal testimonies because it acknowledges that members of marginalized groups may share stories that were previously untold or shared in the company of the dominant group or culture (Villalpando & Bernal, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Focusing on the experiential knowledge of ethnic minority groups, CRT scrutinizes the ways in which race and racism impact these specific groups.

Parker and Lynn (2002) identified three primary objectives to CRT. The first objective is to present stories of discrimination from the viewpoint of people of color. The second objective is to argue for the eradication of racial subjugation while concurrently acknowledging that race is
a social construct. The third objective is to deal with additional matters of difference, like class and sexuality, as well as any injustices experienced by communities. The use of CRT in research often means that the investigator foregrounds race and racism in all facets of the research process and often challenges conventional research texts and worldviews (Creswell, 2007).

CRT proclaims that race is a product of social constructs. It is not fixed nor inherent. It is created by society to be manipulated when convenient (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Racism is ordinary, according to CRT, meaning this is the way society does business. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), racism continues to advance the personal interest and gain of many segments of society, advancing the interest of White elite individuals and the working class. There is essentially, no incentive to eliminate it in society or the workplace.

CRT examines racism as an individual phenomenon as well as a group, identifying the functions of racism as systematic and institutional phenomenon. Differential racialization states that everyone has identities that overlap and conflict with one another, challenging one’s allegiances and loyalties. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) note that under this belief, there is no one singular identity (race, gender, etc.) even though personality, behavioral and physical traits make up a small portion of the commonalities.

Intersectionality highlights these overlapping identities by acknowledging that the experiences of, for example, an African American woman, are not only influenced by race but also by gender and the intersection of race and gender. When studying African American women, one should not solely focus on the ways in which racism has influenced participants’ experiences – or the way sexism has influenced participants’ experiences – but needs to
acknowledge the ways in which racism and sexism overlap to create unique experiences for African American women.

Intersectionality should be viewed as a tool and catalyst for imparting change, which often begins with a commitment to understanding the array of complexities that are embedded within lived experience. It is the premise of intersectionality that people have overlapping identities “derived from social relations, history, and the operation of structured power. People are members of more than one category or social group and can simultaneously experience advantages and disadvantages related to those different social groups” (Richardson & Loubier, 2008, p. 143). Societal oppression, i.e., racism, sexism, homophobia, bigotry, and other forms of oppression, do not act independently of one another. Intersectionality requires an exploration of how these societal oppressions and their combinations influence the lived experiences of individuals in various contexts (Delgado & Stfancic, 2001).

Applying a lens of intersectionality to the study of African American women’s experiences allows for a recognition how not only gender and race, on their own, but the intersections of gender influence African American women’s lived experiences. According to Dill and Zambrana (2009), intersectionality constitutes “an innovative and emerging field of study that provides a critical analytic lens to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, ability, age, sexuality, and gender disparities and to contest existing ways of looking at these structures of inequality, transforming knowledge as well as the social institutions in which they have found themselves” (p. 1).

Intersectional analysis studies the relations of agency and privilege, domination, and subordination through the interpersonal experiences of groups and individuals; the structural
services, social rewards, ideologic symbols, bureaucracy, and hierarchy (Collins, 2000).

Intersectional analysis is characterized by the four tenets; centering the experiences of people of color, exploring the complexities of the individual and group, unveiling the ways interconnected groups in power structure inequality and oppression, and promoting social change and justice by connecting practice and research that create a holistic approach that targets and aims to change social and higher education institutions (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). The recognition of multiple identities, directly connected to intersecting inequalities, serves as a critical step towards understanding the complex experiences of African American women in higher education, addressing hostile climates for African American women leaders, and creating more inclusive and accepting communities.

This is especially important as it pertains to African American women, who often do not reflect the leadership prototype, due to their gender and race, and the intersection of the two. Specifically, there is a lack of understanding of dominance and social power in relation to African American women leadership (Allen, 1995) due to the primary lens of leadership being studied through the mainstream and traditional leadership of White men (Parker, 2005). Using an intersectional framework to study the leadership experiences of African American women will allow me to center the experiences of African American women in leadership, explore the complexities of the individual and group, unveil the interconnected ways in which racism and sexism shape their experiences, and advocate for change in higher education practice and research.
Research Design

Using a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), this study strives to understand the lived experiences of African American women in Chief Housing Officer roles in the United States. Specifically, this study aims to document the stories of and note the challenges or opportunities encountered by African American women in Chief Housing Officer roles at predominately White institutions (PWIs).

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study will be grounded in intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). According to Zamudio et al. (2011), epistemology focuses on how we know and understand the world. An individual’s epistemology is closely connected to their worldview, which is influenced by their racial, gender, and class backgrounds (Zamudio et al., 2011). An epistemology grounded in CRT and intersectionality indicates a belief that knowledge occurs through discourse, requires action and is transformative (Jones et al., 2014).

Intersectionality and CRT highlight the importance of centering diverse voices and working to address the research and participant power imbalance. Intersectionality often transforms the conceptualization of the research project, its investigation, and its connection to the advancement of social justice (Hankivsky et al., 2012). Qualitative intersectionality-informed research has been crucial in distinguishing the commonalities and differences amongst a variety
of groups. The complexities of inequities are captured and addressed through research (Hunting, 2014).

The core elements of intersectionality and CRT focus on lived experiences and stories. Recognizing the importance to tell these stories, I chose narrative inquiry as the methodology, as it similarly allows to highlight individuals’ stories and lived experiences. Utilizing a lens of intersectionality and CRT, I will scrutinize the ways in which race and racism impact participants’ experiences and identify longstanding power structures rooted in White supremacy and privilege which preserve the marginalization of African American women.

CRT addresses the notion of a unique voice of color, essentially creating a tension amongst people of color to have the ability and knowledge of all people of colors experiences regarding race and racism and to speak on those experiences. CRT criticizes this notion, stating that many voices have been excluded and ignored. One could argue that African American women’s stories have not been shared to the same extent as others, indicating a need for this research.

**Methodological Approach: Narrative Inquiry**

This study will use a narrative inquiry approach. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) describe the narrative inquiry approach as studying human lives and honoring the lived experiences. It is a way of understanding experiences through the collaboration of the participant and the researcher. Narrative inquiries take place over time, through social interactions and in a place or series of places. Qualitative research uses narrative in their research; however, narrative inquiry embraces
narrative as the method and the phenomena of the study. Narrative inquiry often begins in experience as lived and told stories, retelling, and reliving the stories of the experiences that make up both social and individual lives.

Through listening, observing, writing, living alongside one another and interpreting texts, narrative inquirers are able to study the lived experiences of the participants involved (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry often falls under the qualitative research methodology label due to the methods for analyzing and understanding lived and told stories that explore cultural, social, linguistic, familial, and institutional narratives. The starting points in narrative inquiry are experimental that are informed by the theoretical literature (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry engages in the reconstruction of one’s social environment and personal experiences in relationships. Studying the participants experience in the world becomes a story that is lived and told through the researcher. The researcher often seeks to transform and enriching the experience of the participant and the researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

For this study, I will combine a traditional narrative inquiry with an autobiographical narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Hubert, 2010), to allow me to not only explore the lived experiences of two to three participants but also compare them to my own experiences as an African American woman in a Chief Housing Officer role at a Predominately White Institution. Narrative inquiry is an ongoing reflexive and reflective methodology in which researchers need to continually inquire into their own experiences while interviewing research participants (Clandinin, 2007). In order to shape the theoretical framework and justifications of the study, many narrative inquirers locate the researcher in the inquiry (Clandinin, 2007). Oftentimes the inquiry also focuses on the researcher’s own experiences’ (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). This
method is known as autobiographical narrative which is often linked with autoethnography (Clandinin & Huber, 2010).

Combining traditional and autobiographical narrative inquiry will allow me to examine my own experiences as an African American woman who serves as a Chief Housing Officer at a Predominately White Institution alongside the experiences of my participants who serve in similar roles. I will be telling and re-telling, interpreting, writing, and synthesizing my own lived experiences in relation to my research topic, similarly to the way I will examine participants’ experiences. This approach will allow me to reflect on differences and similarities between my experiences and those of each of the other participants, adding to the depth and richness of my study.

Participants and Participant Recruitment

Utilizing purposeful sampling methods (Patton, 2002), I plan to utilize the Association for College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I) Organization, NASPA, BIG Ten Housing Professionals Network, as well as professional connections and networks, to identify three individuals who fit the following eligibility requirements of being an individual who (a) currently serves or has served within the past two academic years in a senior leadership position or as Chief Housing Officer within Housing and Residence Life at a four-year Predominately White Institution; (b) self-identify as African American; and (c) self-identify as a womxn. Senior leadership positions would comprise of Director, Executive Director or Assistant Vice President titles. I chose to focus on participants who identify as African American, rather
than Black, to center the experiences of women who have shared lived experience of being born, raised, and educated in the United States. Finally, I utilize the term “womxn” to clarify that this study is open to anyone who self-identifies as a womxn, whether a cisgender or transgender woman.

If utilization and identifying participants through my professional networks is unsuccessful, I will rely on the snowballing technique for sampling (Patton, 2002). Snowball sampling (or chain sampling, referral sampling) is a sampling technique where existing study participants recruit future participants from among their acquaintances (Patton, 2002).

Ideally, the two to three participants will represent diverse institutional types, geographical regions, age demographic, and vary in the student population that their institution serves. I will serve as the fourth participant. I fulfill all the eligibility requirements for the study as I self-identify as an African American woman; I also currently serve in a Chief Housing Officer role at a PWI.

Data Collection

I will collect data through interviews and document analysis for the three participants as well as myself. I will first describe data collection procedures for the three participants; then discuss the data collection for the autobiographical part of the narrative inquiry. Prior to the first interview, I will request the resume or curriculum vitae of each participant. These resumes or CVs will provide background information on the participants.
Each participant will also include a 10-items survey instrument designed to collect demographic data related to each participant. Participants will participate in two interviews; the first and second interview will be 60-90 minutes. All interviews will take place via Zoom. The first interview will occur in June 2021 and will focus the participants journey into the field of higher education and student affairs, their identity, relationships with peers and their perceived success.

The second interview will occur no more than three weeks after the first interview, thus data collection will end by early July 2021 and will focus on their role advancement, retention in role, the COVID-19-19 pandemic and how it impacted them professionally and personally in addition to the Black Lives Matter movement, racial and social injustices faced over the last year. Participants will have the option to choose the date and time of their Zoom interviews to ensure there as minimal disruption to their schedule or workflow. All interviews will be transcribed using Rev.com or Otter.ai.

For the autobiographical part of my study, I will utilize the same data collection methods as I am using for the other participants of the study. Another doctoral student will interview me, using my interview protocols, via the Zoom platform or in person, so that I can be present as a participant and not the researcher during this portion of the study. I will share my resume/curriculum vitae with the interviewer prior to the interview and complete the survey instrument. I will transcribe my interview and add the transcript, along with the resume/curriculum vita and survey responses to my research data.
Data Analysis

As is common in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007), data collection and data analysis will occur concurrently. In narrative research it is critical to collect stories of personal experiences through interviews or conversations, retell the story based on the narrative approach, rewrite the story into chronological order and incorporate the place or setting during the participants experience. Utilizing the three-dimensional space approach created by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I will analyze data utilizing three elements: (a) situational, which examines physical spaces or the storyteller’s spaces; (b) continuity, which examines the past, present, and future; and (c) interaction, which examines the personal and social experiences of the participant. Interpretation of the larger meaning of the story must also occur during the data analysis stage. It is critical in narrative inquiry to retell or re-story the narrative of the participant.

I will start data analysis prior to interviews by reviewing the demographic information collected via the survey and the participants’ resumes or curriculum vitae. These data sets will provide background information that will inform my interviews. After the first round of interviews for the participants has concluded, I will read and re-read each interview transcript, making notes in the margin to capture my initial responses, and identifying important follow-up questions that I want to bring up in the second interview. In a first round of coding, I will highlight important turning points in participants’ stories and mark sections that speak specifically to the ways race, gender, and intersections of race and gender influenced participants’ experiences.
In these early rounds of coding, I will focus on each participants’ individual story. As I read and re-read interviews, I will create descriptive categories or themes that capture the experience of the individual participants. After the second round of interviews, I will complete the same steps as above for the second set of transcripts. I will again focus on each individual participants’ story first, identifying turning points and segments of data that speak to race, gender, and the intersections of the two interviews. Next, I will draft each participant’s narrative, which will re-tell the participant’s story.

During these steps in data analysis, I will treat my own interview transcripts the same way as those of my participants. I will engage in the same steps of data analysis of these transcripts and will also create a narrative that tells my story. My colleague, who will conduct the interviews with me, has agreed to also serve as a peer reviewer for this part of my study and to provide feedback on my draft narrative.

After creating each participants’ narrative – and asking participants for feedback on their narratives as part of member checking, a process described further under criteria for quality – I will start to compare participants’ narratives. I will start by re-reading each of the narratives. In a next step, I will create descriptive codes or categories to identify commonalities and differences in the experiences of my participants. Next, I will collapse codes into themes. I will share these emerging themes with participants for feedback and create a final findings sections that highlights commonalities and differences between participants’ experiences, using segments of individual’s stories to support each theme and to center participants’ voices in the final re-telling of all of our stories.
For data analysis, I will use Nvivo12 software to sort, group, code, and develop themes. Nvivo12 allows you make notes, print, and retrieve data by set or category. I will enter interview transcriptions and later each participant’s narrative into the software. Utilizing Nvivo12 will allow me to stay organized throughout the data analysis process. However, to maintain a closeness with the data – and in particular the voices of my participants – I will, at several times during the data analysis, re-read the entire interview transcripts – and in later steps the entire narrative – in an effort to get a comprehensive understanding of participants’ stories as a whole.

Criteria for Quality and Trustworthiness

Narrative inquiry, as other qualitative research methodologies, utilizes different criteria of quality than validity, reliability, and generalizability (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry is a fluid inquiry that challenges representation assumptions and requires ongoing reflection, known as wakefulness (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Wakefulness is needed to characterize the narrative inquiries in the field, when writing research, or when simply wondering what criteria most fits for a specific narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). A good narrative study should have an “explanatory, invitational quality, as having authenticity, as having adequacy and plausibility” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000, p. 185). Several criteria for quality in narrative inquiry have been identified including apparency, verisimilitude, and transferability (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Apparency is a clear, understandable representation of the data. Verisimilitude refers to the probability that research findings are consistent with and have the semblance of truth in relation the real world.
There are three aspects that narrative researchers generally find helpful related to verisimilitude. The story and findings should resonate with the experience of the researcher (Mertova & Webster, 2020). The reporting should be believable and realistic, accurately reflecting all the complexities that exist in real life and engaging the reader (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and truthfulness of the accounts should be confirmed using other events (Mertova & Webster, 2020). Finally, transferability implies that the researcher provides a sufficient base to permit a person contemplating application in another setting to make the needed comparisons of similarity (Mertova & Webster, 2020). The reader should be able to make comparisons of similarity from another setting (Mertova & Webster, 2020).

To achieve apparent, verisimilitude, and transferability, I will engage in member checking, peer review, and sharing of rich, thick descriptions. First, member checks of the three interviews will ensure that I accurately represent participants’ voices. Member checks will occur consistently throughout the analysis process. Each interview will be analyzed and synthesized and shared with the participants via email, after the second interview.

After all interviews have been completed and I have not only created individual narratives but analyzed my data for themes among participants, I will share those emerging themes with participants via e-mail. Participants will be able to provide feedback either via e-mail or by setting up a quick phone call or Zoom meeting. Ongoing dialogue will be crucial to ensure the research is capturing the participants’ stories accurately. Second, I will complete peer examination utilizing ACUHO-I’s Professionals of Color Network and the BIG Ten Housing Professional Network in addition to the dissertation committee peer review process.
Peer examination will allow me to ensure that I represent my findings in a clear, understandable manner. Moreover, peer reviewers will be able to give me insights into whether my findings resonate not only with my experiences as a researcher but the experiences of others with similar identities working in the field of housing and residence life. Finally, using rich, thick descriptions will ensure that I provide the needed context to improve the transferability of my findings, while also allowing the reader to make their own judgments about my data and the conclusions I drew.

In addition to these criteria connected to narrative inquiry, I will also utilize catalytic validity (Lather, 1986), a technique common to CRT or intersectional research. Catalytic validity “refers to the degree to which the research process re-orient[s], focusses, and energizes participants in what Freire (1973) terms ‘conscientization,’ knowing reality in order to better transform it” (Lather, 1986, p. 86). The goal in research that uses catalytic validity is for research participants to gain self-determination and self-understanding as part of participating in the research. I will strive to create good rapport with my research participants, which will allow for authentic and genuine conversations, where we can learn from and with each other. I will use this research project to explore our experiences as African American women in Housing and Residence Life, make meaning of these experiences, celebrate our resilience, and collectively give a voice to our experiences in hopes of transforming our field and providing more opportunities for African American women to advance to senior leadership positions.
Researcher Positionality

I am an African American woman in a Chief Housing Officer role at a PWI. I have been working in housing, residential life, residence education, residential services, or resident life since July 2004. As a sophomore at Elon University, I joined the Residential Life team as a Resident Assistant for the suites and apartments. In 2004, I could not have imagined, that seventeen years later, I would still be working for the betterment of the on-campus living experience for all students; that I would be helping faculty and staff realize that our students don’t live compartmentalized lives and that we, in housing and residence life, are part of the college and educational experience. As an African American woman who is in her mid-thirties, I have dedicated my adult life to working in this field and profession and at every institution where I have been employed; Washington University in St. Louis, Northwestern University and The University of Maryland-College Park; I have been one of the few women of color in a leadership role within the housing and residence life department.

Having many years of experience within housing and residence and not many African American women colleagues in the field, I find myself wondering about others’ lived experiences. Have they experienced, thrived, endured, or compartmentalized their experiences in housing and residence life, like myself? How have they been able to live through the dichotomy, dual edged expectations and expectations cast upon them? As an African American woman, with seventeen years in housing and residence life; three as an undergraduate student, two as a graduate student, and eleven as a professional staff member; this research is personal. As an “insider” – and even a participant in this study – I hope that the commonalities I share with my
participants will allow me as the researcher to build rapport with the participants. I will engage in
ongoing memoing and reflection on the commonalities and differences between my participants’
and my experience. Through frequent member checking, I plan on ensuring that I will accurately
represent my participants’ stories, as they would tell them and centering their unique voices and
perspectives. In the commonalities and differences among our stories, I hope to provide a
perspective that other African American women, whether in senior leadership positions in
Housing and Residential Life or aspiring to move to those positions, can relate to.

Limitations

The United States is grappling with what I often refer to as three different pandemics;
COVID-19, racial injustice and police brutality, and financial turmoil, all of which have had a
tremendous negative impact on people of color, mainly African Americans. When the pandemic
began in February 2020, we could not have imagined the national events that would overshadow
our career aspirations and experiences. The most vulnerable members of our society; those who
are low income, disabled, battle a chronic or terminal illness, and people of color have had their
focus shifted from their career paths, to simply trying to survive the pandemic with their health,
financial stability, and dignity. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement has highlighted the
brutality that communities of color have faced for decades.

African American women in Chief Housing Officer Roles at PWIs, are not immune to the
world happenings and are directly and indirectly impacted by these circumstances. Career
trajectory may not be the greatest need that is focused on during a time with many competing
needs and priorities. This may lead to limitations for this study, as participants may be pulled in many different directions, may have limited time to devote to participating in this study, and their experiences may greatly be shaped by the unique national contexts we are currently experiencing. At the same time, these challenging circumstances will provide a rich background for an examination of the ways in which race and gender, and the intersections of race and gender, influence participants’ experiences. I intend to lean into these unique circumstances to share a detailed description of participants’ lives leading up to but also during the year of three pandemics.

Other potential limitations of the research study include challenges in recruiting enough participants for this study due to the lack of African American women in Housing and Residence Life who hold senior level positions at predominately white institutions. Work and personal responsibilities may occupy participants’ time making it difficult for them to engage in the research process. Another limitation of the study could be challenges in developing rapport with participants because of conducting all interviews virtually due to COVID-19. I had initially planned to conduct some interviews virtual and others in person, visiting my participants on their campuses and spending time with them at their institutions. Such in-person interactions would have provided me with more opportunities to establish rapport with participants and to better understand their work environment and campus climate.

Finally, as an African American woman in a Chief Housing Officer role at a PWI, researcher’s biases could be a limitation in this study (Merriam, 1988). However, I will be using my own story as part of the data; thus, intentionally incorporating my story in my research and comparing it to the stories of participants. This will allow me to reflect on how my experiences
may differ from those of participants. In addition, member checking processes will allow me to ensure that I accurately represent my participants’ experiences.

Significance

This study seeks to bring understanding and voice to the unique experiences and challenges of African American women in leadership roles. This narrative inquiry specifically aims to examine the leadership experience, opportunities for role growth and retention of three African American women who are senior leaders within Housing and Residence Life at four-year PWIs. Mosley (1980) and Howe-Barksdale (2007) note that future research is needed on the experiences of African American women in higher education administration. Previous research has offered strategies for senior leadership and administration at PWIs as well as strategies for success and empowerment for African American women (Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

Few studies, however, have focused specifically on African American women experiences in a Chief Housing Officer role (for exceptions, see Myrich, 2020). Housing and Residence Life professionals are not only responsible for the living experiences of residential students; they are responsible for their health, safety and wellbeing while living in the residence halls. They are responsible for providing leadership opportunities, educational and social programming and safety and security. The majority of the roles in housing and residence life require direct connection and communication with faculty, staff, parents, guardians, families, and students.
Being a housing and residence life professional is different from many staff positions on campus and requires many to be on call and available 24-hours a day and requires staff to address issues surrounding roommate conflicts, policy violations, bias incidents, and mental health concerns, personal or family crisis. This research study will shed light on the experiences of African American women, who lead these units and departments and serve as mentors and role models to many across campus and be utilized to continue growing the diverse population of Chief Housing Officer role in at PWIs.

The study will add to current literature focusing on African American women in leadership roles in Higher Education and address the gap in the literature that exists when discussing Housing and Residential Life experiences for African American women. This study will also allow other African American women in housing and residence life understand the experiences of their peers, colleagues, mentors, or supervisors and hopefully create a bond of shared experiences and sisterhood within the field. Further, this study will allow those who aspire to be in similar roles understand what their experiences might be or allow them to challenge the obstacles in the way earlier in their career.

As institution’s strive to diversify their leadership and create more inclusive campus communities, this research will provide insights in the ways in which racism and sexism have influenced African American women’s career trajectories pre- and during the COVID-19-19 pandemic. By doing so, this research will serve as a call to action against anti-Blackness and sexism in academia, in general, and Housing and Residential Life departments and Student Affairs divisions, in particular.
CHAPTER 2

EAT GLASS AND WALK ON FIRE, WHILE MANAGING A PANDEMIC:
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY ON THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN
WOMEN WHO SERVE AS CHIEF HOUSING OFFICERS

Abstract

Creating uncertainty and stress, the COVID-19 pandemic and increased attention on racial relations, drastically changed how higher education and student affairs operated. For African American women, combatting racism and sexism has always been a daily occurrence in their professional and personal life but the pandemic heightened the challenges African American women had to overcome. This narrative inquiry study explored the lived experiences of African American women who were serving as Chief Housing Officers at Predominately White Institutions during the first 18-months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings highlight how the intersection of sexism and racism shaped the lived experiences of the African American women participants. Participants encountered barriers when striving to lead authentically while feeling pressure to succeed in managing pandemic-related challenges, not only for their department but their institutions. Participants felt compelled to serve as voices for communities of color on their campuses while dealing with racism and sexism in their everyday professional lives. These experiences forced participants to re-evaluate how they were presenting at home and at work.

Keywords: COVID-19, intersectionality, African American women, Chief Housing Officer
Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed how higher education institutions operate (Chronicle Staff, 2020). The pandemic created stress and uncertainty as well as fears about health and safety for student affairs staff (Anderson, 2020). In addition to the pandemic, the United States also experienced increased attention for the Black Lives Matter movement after several murders of Black individuals – men and women – by police in 2020. Moreover, fall 2020 and early spring 2021 saw increased political division due to a highly contested presidential election. These events have negatively impacted the mental well-being of many U.S. Americans (Vahratian et al., 2021). Communities of color were and continue to be hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic (Fortuna et al., 2020), while also dealing with the trauma of police brutality and heated racial debates during the election (Thomas, 2021). As Glaude (2020) described, for Black Americans, “terror, trauma, and coronavirus are knotted together like a thick briar bush with thorns” (p. 24-25). Similar to other Black Americans, African American women in Higher Education and Student Affairs, specifically, Housing and Residence Life were not immune, in their personal or professional sphere, to the trauma or terror caused by the pandemic and racial reckoning.

Intersections of racism and sexism limit African American women’s ability to lead authentically in higher education institutions (Harris & Patton, 2019; Jones et al., 2012). African American women leaders often find their authority questioned and have their qualifications validated before they are accepted into their roles or face extended trial periods (Byrd, 2008; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020). When exercising their leadership authority, African American
women regularly confront bias and discrimination when exercising their leadership authority (Holder et al., 2015; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Parker, 2005). Acts of bias range from overt to subtle, leading to frustration and confusion, and forcing African American women to adapt to the dominant culture (Forsyth & Carter, 2012; Holder et al., 2015; Parker, 2001). These encounters are disempowering, and the lack of social networks due to a lack of representation of African American women in higher education leadership positions means African American women lack access to information and support (Myrick, 2020; Parker, 2001).

Living at the intersections of race and gender, African American women leaders in higher education have always encountered unique challenges in their professional and personal lives (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Mosley, 1980). The COVID-19 pandemic likely heightened the challenges African American women leaders had to confront in their daily lives. Notably, due to systemic oppression and marginalization related to gender, race, and the intersection of race and gender, African American women are particularly vulnerable and susceptible to adverse health conditions due to COVID-19 (Chandler et al., 2021). In addition, African American women encountered increased discrimination in 2020 (Ruiz et al., 2020). Thus, the purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the lived experiences of African American women in Chief Housing Roles within Housing and Residence Life at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) during the first 18-months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020 through August 2021).
Literature Review

This study builds on literature on the experiences of African American women in leadership positions in higher education, more generally, as well as literature on the experiences of African American women in housing and residence life. As housing and residence life positions often serve as an important steppingstone in the pathways of senior student affairs officers (Biddix, 2011), better understanding the experiences of African American women serving in leadership roles in housing and residence life can help us understand how intersections of racism and sexism disrupt the pipeline to senior student affairs positions for African American women. Considering the limited research on African American women in housing and residence life, the broader literature on African American women in leadership roles in higher education provides a framing to understand how sexism and racism intersect to shape the experiences of African American women at higher education institutions.

African American Women, Leadership and Higher Education

African American women have endured disgraceful treatment; institutionalized racism and sexism, communication challenges, and unwelcoming environments for decades at the hands of educational institutions (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Henry & Glenn, 2009; Lloyd-Jones, 2009; Mosley, 1980). Much research has discussed the ways in which organizations often hid these conditions of African American women; by ignoring their plight, creating self-identity
issues, feelings of tokenism, loneliness, and a sense of isolation (Lewis, 2016; Mainah & Perkins, 2015; Mosley, 1980).

Many of the experiences that African American women face, particularly in predominantly White organizations, are not solely located within separate spheres of race, gender, or social class (Townsend, 2021; Crenshaw, 1989). In predominantly White organizations, sexism and racism tend to limit the opportunities for leadership for African American women (Townsend, 2021; Slaughter, 2015). Overall, African American, Asian American, and Latino men and women are more likely to experience covert discrimination and subtle prejudice leading to outgroup status and occupational segregation as a result, but women of color also carry the burden of racism and sexism combined (West, 2017; Browne & Askew, 2006; Leung & Gupta, 2007; Hyun, 2005; Combs, 2003). Within these organizations, African American women are outsiders-within – a status of disempowerment within interactive systems of power, race, gender, and social class (Slaughter, 2015; Collins, 1998). Though the number of African American women leaders in predominantly White organizations is increasing, the socially constructed hierarchies of race, gender, and the intersection of race and gender continue to disempower the process of leadership (Townsend, 2021; Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017; West, 2017).

While African American women’s leadership is questioned, they also often find themselves tapped for additional diversity or mentoring-related tasks (Boss et al., 2019; Griffin, 20103; Howard-Hamilton & Patitu, 2012). Those additional tasks include taking on and leading diversity initiatives on campus and being included on committees to represent diversity of the campus (Allen et al, 2019). African American women are seen as caring and nurturing for
communities of color and therefore take additional time to mentor and guide students through their college experience (Griffin, 2013; Warren-Gordon & Graff, 2018). African American women are thus likely to work additional hours compared to their White and men colleagues. Many African American women, however, not only face long hours and stress at work but must balance these with time-consuming family responsibilities (McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2021).

Women, in general, are overrepresented in household leadership, meaning they often carry the major responsibilities for caring for dependents and managing household duties on top of their workplace responsibilities (Dowdy & Hamilton, 2012; Seedat & Rondon, 2021; Sauer et al., 2020). African American women, especially, are uniquely burdened by this responsibility (Boss et al., 2019; Marine & Alemán, 2018). Reasons include generational wealth, which has an impact on household responsibilities, cultural family responsibilities within the African American household, and responsibilities around elder care (McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2021; Nichols & Stahl 2019). There is a toll that comes with balancing career duties and other obligations at home that leads to burn-out and stress (McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2021; Van Der Feltz-Cornelis, 2020).

Compounding on the cultural and professional burden that African American women experience, the COVID-19 pandemic increased that impact even more (Njoku & Evans, 2022). Early research on the pandemic indicates that the pandemic increased stress and burn out for many student affairs professionals (Nyunt, 2021; Thomas, 2021; Van Der Feltz-Cornelis, 2020). For those African American women at home with children, the additional stress of needing to home school or lack of daycare increased the likelihood of burnout (Lee, et al., 2021; Lightfoot et al., 2021; McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2021). Lastly, the racial reckoning led to campuses
asking African American women to increase their responsibilities by taking on more diversity initiatives on campus (Njoku & Evans, 2022). Although none of these challenges were new for African American women, the compounding effect COVID-19 had on the stress increased that burden and expectation while also shedding light on the inequities that African American women experienced (Stebleton & Buford, 2021).

**Housing and Residence Life**

Housing and Residence Life departments are complex organizations that played a significant role at many higher education institutions before the COVID-19 pandemic and continued to play a demanding role during and after. Housing and Residence Life is a common department for student affairs professionals to start their careers (Biddix, 2011). The departments play an important role within Student Affairs, contributing to the practical and formative training ground for new student affairs professionals (McCluskey-Titus, Cawthon, & Helms, 2019). Residence Life professionals report many positive outcomes of working in this functional area such as strong support from supervisors, connection to students, and opportunities for growth and development (Reed, 2015). However, there are many issues Housing and Residence Life staff face such as late-night meetings or events with students or being on call for campus emergencies that can contribute to decreased sleep, create high stress, and emotional exhaustion (Vaughn, 2014).

Less than a decade ago, only 10.3% of Chief Housing Officers identified as non-White (Erwin & Marina, 2013). By 2019, this percentage had increased to approximately 25% but still
did not align with the increasing diversity of residential students, as almost half of all first-time, full-time college students identify as non-White (ACUHO-I, 2019). Lower-level positions in Housing and Residence Life tend to have a larger percentage of non-White staff with 34% of Residence Hall Managers identifying as non-White (ACUHO-I, 2019). There is a lack of visual diversity, specifically African American women, serving in mid-level residence life positions, and even less serving in Chief Housing Officer roles (Myrick, 2020). Thus, while there is a growing number of African American women entering the field of Higher Education and Residence Life, numbers of diverse staff members, and in particular African American women, decreases in mid-level and particularly senior level residence life positions (Myrick, 2020). These statistics indicate a lack of opportunity for advancement or barriers to advancement for African American women in housing and residence life.

Chief Housing Officers hold many responsibilities, supervise many areas, and holds a variety of differing position titles. The Chief Housing Officer is usually the senior-level housing officer responsible for oversight and the management of operations, strategic and capital planning, and personnel (Horvath & Stack, 2013). As Erwin and Marina (2013) highlight, “increasing the diversity make-up of Chief Housing Officer role is important in an environment that serves diverse populations and is committed to the social justice principles” (p.47). Moreover, because of the breadth and depth of experiences that Chief Housing Officers gain, the position often serves as a common pipeline to Senior Student Affairs Officer (SSAO) positions at four-year institutions (Biddix, 2011). African American women are underrepresented in Senior Student Affairs Officer positions (Biddix, 2013). Addressing barriers African American women
face in Chief Housing Officer positions could thus help to improve the pipeline for African American women to Senior Student Affairs Officer positions.

Few studies have explored the experiences of African American women in Chief Housing Officer roles (for an exception, see Myrick, 2020). Previous research, however, highlights that African American Chief Housing Officers report lower levels of personal alignment with their organization (Erwin & Marina, 2013). Women, on the other hand, report fewer advancement opportunities (Erwin & Marina, 2013). More research is needed to understand how intersections of racism and sexism shape the experiences of African American women in Chief Housing Officer positions.

Such research is particularly important considering recent contexts of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Housing and Residence Life staff reported increased fear for safety and health and decreased social-psychological well-being (Nyunt, 2021). Many staff members wished they were not working in Residence Life during these challenging times and questioned whether they wanted to stay in Housing and Residence Life (Nyunt, 2021). The current study builds on this previous literature focusing on the experiences of African American women who serve as Chief Housing Officers at Predominately White Institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

I approached this study through an intersectional lens. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) coined the term “intersectionality”, though her work built on decades of research by Black feminists.
Intersectionality focuses on the ways in which intersecting identities shape an individual’s experiences. Intersectionality emerged from Critical Race Theory (CRT), a framework created by a group of law and legal policy scholars concerned about racial suppression in society. Focusing on the experiential knowledge of ethnic minority groups, CRT scrutinizes the ways in which race and racism impact these specific groups (Villalpando & Bernal, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Crenshaw’s (1989) work acknowledges that everyone has identities that overlap and conflict with one another, challenging one’s allegiances and loyalties. Intersectionality contextualizes and allows for a mapping of the ways in which race intersects with gender, ethnicity, nationality, language, and other key categories connected to social existence, (in)equalities, and (in)equities (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris & Patton, 2019). The intersectional experience is both interconnected and endless since all these factors continuously overlap (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality highlights these overlapping identities by acknowledging that the experiences of, for example, an African American woman, are not only influenced by race but also by gender and the intersection of race and gender. When studying African American women, one should not solely focus on the ways in which racism has influenced their experiences – or the way sexism has influenced participants’ experiences – but should acknowledge the ways in which racism and sexism overlap to create unique experiences for African American women (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris & Patton, 2019).

Intersectional analysis is characterized by four tenets: (a) centering the experiences of people of color, (b) exploring the complexities of the individual and group, (c) unveiling the ways interconnected groups in power structure inequality and oppression, and (d) promoting
social change and justice (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Dill & Zambrana, 2009). The recognition of multiple identities, directly connected to intersecting inequalities, serves as a critical step towards understanding the experiences of African American women in higher education, addressing hostile climates for African American women leaders, and creating more inclusive and accepting communities. This is especially important as it pertains to African American women, who oftentimes do not reflect the leadership prototype, due to their gender and race, and the intersection of the two (Harris & Patton, 2019).

Intersectionality highlights the importance of centering diverse voices and working to address the research and participant power imbalance. Intersectionality often transforms the conceptualization of the research project, its investigation, and its connection to the advancement of social justice (Hankivsky et al., 2012; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Qualitative intersectionality-informed research has been crucial in distinguishing the commonalities and differences amongst a variety of groups. The complexities of inequities are captured and addressed through research (Harris & Patton, 2019; Hunting, 2014). Using an intersectional framework to study the leadership experiences of African American women allowed me to center the experiences of African American women in leadership, explore the complexities of the individuals and group, unveil the interconnected ways in which racism and sexism shaped their experiences, and advocate for change in higher education practice and research.
Methodology

This study used a narrative inquiry approach. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described the narrative inquiry approach as studying human lives and honoring their lived experiences. Narrative inquiry is an ongoing reflexive and reflective methodology in which researchers need to continually inquire into their own experiences while interviewing research participants. It is a way of understanding experiences through the collaboration of the participant and the researcher. Narrative inquiries take place over time, through social interactions and in a place or series of places. Through listening, observing, writing, living alongside one another, and interpreting texts, narrative inquirers are able to study the lived experiences of the participants involved.

To shape the theoretical framework and justifications of the study, many narrative inquirers locate the researcher in the inquiry (Clandinin et al., 2018; Clandinin, 2007). Oftentimes the inquiry also focuses on the researcher’s own experiences (Clandinin et al., 2018; Clandinin & Huber, 2010). This method is known as autobiographical narrative which is often linked with autoethnography (Clandinin et al., 2018; Clandinin & Huber, 2010). For this study, I combined a traditional narrative inquiry with an autobiographical narrative inquiry (Clandinin et al., 2018; Clandinin & Hubert, 2010), to allow me to not only explore the lived experiences of three participants but also to compare them to my own experiences as an African American woman in a senior leadership position at a large Housing and Residence Life department at a Predominately White Institution.
Participants

I utilized purposeful sampling methods (Patton, 2002) to identify participants for this study. Individuals who (a) currently served or had served within the past two academic years in a senior leadership position or as Chief Housing Officer within Housing and Residence Life at a four-year Predominately White Institution; (b) self-identified as African American; and (c) self-identified as a womxn, were eligible. Senior leadership positions consisted of Director, Executive Director, Assistant Dean or Assistant Vice President titles. I chose to focus on participants who identified as African American, rather than Black, to center the experiences of women who have shared lived experience of being born, raised, and educated in the United States. Finally, I utilized the term “womxn” to clarify that this study is open to anyone who self-identifies as a womxn, whether a cisgender or transgender womxn.

To recruit participants, I utilized the Association for College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I) Organization, NASPA, BIG Ten Housing Professionals Network, as well as professional connections and networks. Many potential participants were identified by close colleagues, faculty members, and the ACUHO-I Leadership Academy African American women cohort. I sent potential participants a personalized email which included a copy of the IRB approval and an interest form to complete with instructions to sign up for their first interview if they wanted to participate. Three African American womxn volunteered to participate in my study; I was the fourth participant. See Table 1 for participant demographics.
Table 1

Participant and Institutional Demographics

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
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Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through two virtual interviews in addition to document analysis. Prior to the first interview, I requested the resume or curriculum vitae (CV) and of each participant. The resume, CV, and participant profile provided necessary background information about each participant’s educational background, institutional type, and other social identities (defined
broadly as race/ethnicity but also may include other identities such as volunteer, wife, mother, etc.) most salient to them. Each participant completed a 10-item survey instrument designed to collect demographic data. Participants then joined the researcher in two 60-90-minute-long interviews via Zoom. The first interviews occurred in July 2021 and focused on the participants journey into the field of higher education and student affairs, their identity, relationships with peers, their perceived success, and their role at their institution in relation to managing COVID-19. The second round of interviews occurred in late July and early August and focused on COVID-19, racial reckoning, financial and political unrest, how their experiences were impacted or influenced, and how they were impacted professionally and personally.

For the autobiographical portion of the study, I utilized the same data collection methods. Another doctoral student served as the interviewer, using my interview protocols, via the Zoom platform so that I could be present as a participant and not the researcher during this portion of the study. I shared my resume/curriculum vitae with the interviewer prior to the interview and completed the survey instrument. Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection. As soon as an interview was completed, I transcribed it using Otter.ai’s automatic transcription service and later edited it for clarity, mistakes and annotations.

In narrative inquiry, it is critical to retell or re-story the narrative of the participant in an effort to interpret the larger meaning of the story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Thus, in my first round of coding, I focused on getting a sense of each participants’ individual story. As I read and re-read interviews, I created descriptive categories that captured the experience of the individual participants. Utilizing the three-dimensional space approach created by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I analyzed data focusing on three elements: (a) situational, which examines physical
spaces or the storyteller’s spaces; (b) continuity, which examines the past, present, and future; and (c) interaction, which examines the personal and social experiences of the participant.

Considering my theoretical framework, I also identified turning points and segments of data that spoke to race, gender, and the intersections of the two interviews. I then drafted a narrative for each participant.

The next steps in data analysis focused on understanding similarities and differences among the individual stories of participants. Through multiple rounds of reading and re-reading narratives, I created themes that spoke to the ways racism and sexism shaped participants’ experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, I created a composite narrative incorporating aspects of the stories of all four participants into two fictional characters. Utilizing a composite narrative to share my findings allowed me to decrease the risk of identifiability of my participants but to also shows the shared experiences of the participants during the 18-month period. The setting of the compositive narrative – a conversation between Natalie and Marie, two African American women who are Chief Housing Officers – is fictional but all quotes are directly taken from interviews with the participants.

Quality of Research

Narrative inquiry is a fluid inquiry that challenges representation assumptions and requires ongoing reflection, known as wakefulness (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Clandinin et al., 2018). Wakefulness is needed to characterize the narrative inquiries in the field, when writing research, or when simply wondering what criteria most fits for a specific narrative inquiry.
(Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Clandinin et al., 2018). Several other criteria for quality in narrative inquiry have been identified including apparency, verisimilitude, and transferability (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Clandinin et al., 2018).

To achieve apparency, verisimilitude, and transferability, I engaged in member checking, peer review, and the sharing of rich, thick descriptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). First, member checks of the two interviews ensured I accurately represent participants’ voices. Member checks occurred consistently throughout the analysis process. After each interview was analyzed and synthesized, I shared the emergent thematic codes with participants via email. I also discussed the themes from the first round of interviews with the participants in the beginning of the second interview. Second, after all interviews were completed, peer reviews, with other African American women, fellow colleagues, and housing professionals, were completed. Finally, I use rich, thick descriptions and longer direct quotes in my composite narrative to provide insights into participants’ experiences, using their own words.

**Researcher Positionality**

My identities align with the eligibility criteria of the research study. I am an African American woman. During the time I was conducting the study, I served as a Chief Housing Officer role at a Predominately White Institution. I joined Residence Life as a sophomore at Elon University in 2004 and subsequently have served as a Resident Assistant, Coordinator, Residential College Director, Assistant Director, Associate Director and Director roles at
multiple PWI’s. I have dedicated 17 years working within the field of Higher Education and Student Affairs, specifically, in Housing and Residence Life.

My own experiences working in Residence Life as an African American woman, and in particular my experiences during the first 18-months of the COVID-19 pandemic, inspired my interest in this study. Sharing the same identities with my participants allowed me not only to be a participant in the study but also to connect on a close, personal level with my participants. Being an insider to the study population as well as a research participant, I, however, had to challenge myself to not only focus on the similarities in our experiences but recognize and acknowledge the differences.

Findings

It was early August 2021, what some refer to as the Dog Days of summer in the South, when Marie and Natalie, two African American Women Directors of Housing and Residence Life, met up at a tapas restaurant. Marie arrived first, grabbed a seat outside and waited for her sister-friend, mentor and colleague, Natalie, to arrive. They hadn’t seen each other in over 18 months due to the explosion of the COVID-19 pandemic and its multiple variants. Both were looking forward to having an opportunity to reflect and learn about what life had been like for each other in their roles of mother, sister, friend, colleague, Chief Housing Officer at a Predominately White Institution, and finally as an African American woman living during a global pandemic but also during a racial reckoning and financial unrest in the United States of America.
Black Women Can Do Hard Things

After Natalie arrived and careful hugs were exchanged, Marie was eager to hear about Natalie’s experiences over the last 18 months. Marie jumped right in and asked Natalie how she’s been managing such a large, stressful role as an African American woman during a global pandemic. Natalie smirked and said, “This is what I’ve been trained for. This is what I like.” She paused for a minute before continuing:

You know, everybody looks at Housing and Residence Life during a pandemic, and I just never wanted to give anybody that satisfaction...we're going to do it well, and I think that has to do with my identity as a Black woman, like Black women have been doing hard stuff for a long time.

Marie nodded slowly, deep in thought reflecting on how Black women have always done hard things and often feel the need to prove to others that we can do things well. But during the pandemic, everything just felt so much harder. Marie said:

[During the pandemic,] I found myself doing a lot of things that other people just wouldn't do, because they were afraid, they were going to get sick. So, on one hand, I'm doing all these great leadership things, right. And on the other hand, I'm doing walkthroughs in residence hall rooms, because my community staff refused to do it. It stretched me as a leader, as a supervisor it stretched my patience, and my ability to develop early career professionals.

Natalie nodded her head along in agreement then added:

We had to think about students that were going to be displaced, that maybe couldn't go to a home, we had to think about the financial costs that were going to be the result…. I don't see my White counterparts doing enough work and, and taking enough responsibility for this work, both as allies, but as administrators too. It's kind of like, they can leave at five o'clock every day, because they don't feel a sense of, I need to check in on our students or staff and see how they're doing and for me, it's the opposite.

Natalie paused for a minute, took a sip of her drink, then added, “While I know I need to leave at five, it's hard just to leave knowing that we've got students or staff that are not in a good space.”
Marie had to stop herself from yelling “Amen,” and her thoughts wondered to her own White colleagues and the predominately White spaces she had to navigate in her professional life.

Marie responded:

You know, what you said really made me think about representation and how it matters. So often, I’ve walked into spaces where decisions are made at the university and I’m the only African American woman. I remember this one meeting during COVID-19. I walked into a room and there were probably 25 people in the room. I was the only person of color. And it was breathtaking for me. I mean, these are people who I work with every day. I like them. They're good people. But when you walk into a room and the majority of the room are White men in suits, you think to yourself, oh my God, like do y'all not see that this is an issue. Right?

Natalie nodded thinking to herself; we have all been there, being the only African American woman in the room, the only voice for African American students, the only voice for women, the only one recognizing the intersections of these identities and how they shape our and our students’ everyday lives.

I Don’t Run From Leadership

A deep pain and exhaustion lingered in the air between Natalie and Marie as they sat in silence. Their silence was interrupted by the waiter bringing them more tapas and asking if they would like anything else. After he left, leaning in Natalie shared:

In the span of closing the residence halls in March 2020 to serving on the safe return to campus university planning committee, I was not only managing the feelings and emotions and all that stuff that was happening with individuals in my department, I was also managing the Presidential DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] Taskforce.

Marie interrupted her friend and asked, “Wait? When were you asked to serve on the DEI taskforce?” Natalie chuckled and explained:
In the midst of all of this, George Floyd is murdered. And I'm already, as a Director of Residence Life on the return to campus committee. I'm already on other committees for COVID, and my Vice President asks if I would co-chair the campus wide Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Task Force. I said, of course, I don't run from leadership.

Marie, similarly, was asked to chair the Divisional DEI Task Force at her institution, something she cared deeply for and was very passionate about. Nevertheless, it struck her that here they were, two African American Chief Housing Officers at completely different institutions and both had been asked to chair their institution’s DEI task force. As Natalie continued to detail the number of racially charged incidents on her campus and how she felt a pull for being the voice for underrepresented staff and students due to holding a position of leadership. Natalie concluded, “I can’t do the entire lifting of people of color for the Division.” Feeling the shared fatigue Marie shared her own experiences:

I chaired the Divisional DEI Task Force [too]. And that was hard, on top of my already stressful role managing a large Residence Life Department, quarantine, isolation, and crises. I was glad to do it, I'd sign up to do it again, but that was hard. It was as if I had to eat glass and walk on fire, while managing a pandemic. So, by the time I was on the other side of that, I didn’t care what anyone else thought.

Seeing Natalie nod in agreement, Marie asked the question that had been on her mind since Natalie first shared, she had been asked to chair the DEI task force, “How is it that we are having such a similar experience, at different institutional types, sizes and geographical locations?”

Natalie laughed. There was no need to respond. They both knew that as Black women, they were more likely to be tapped for diversity-related tasks and the racial reckoning of the past 18 months had not changed anything but rather increased their workload. Marie was still deep in thought, when Natalie chimed in, sharing her own frustrations resulting from White people’s response to the racial reckoning:
I felt frustrated by [White] people's newfound understanding of racism. Not always knowing what to say and when was a difficult dance. Admittedly, as an institution, we didn’t always get it right or provide the support that students and staff needed and sometimes students and staff forgot that we were people as well.

Marie nodded. It was as if Natalie had read her mind. So often had she experienced students and staff of Color having high expectations of her, unaware of the challenges and frustrations she encountered when trying to be a voice for the community. Natalie, however, was not done yet. Thinking of the struggles of advocating for students while navigating racism and sexism herself reminded her of the never-ending struggles she faced while working with campus police as an African American woman. She continued:

On the one hand, I feel a need to address the university police’s lack of care and compassion for students and the communities lived experiences. On the other hand, the encounters are challenging which are, let’s be honest, likely due to me being African American and a woman. I am constantly battling their aggression towards me and even called the Police Chief to talk about the behavior of one of his officers. Do you know what he said to me?

Natalie chuckled and Marie immediately knew she was about to share an egregious story that as African American women they could never get away with. Natalie said:

I called the Police Chief, and his response was “well, you know, maybe that police officer had a bad day, maybe they had a fight with their wife or something and now they're upset…”

Natalie was clearly irritated by the Chief’s response but finally talking about her struggles also felt freeing. She continued:

We are all human, we all have bad days, but when you're a police officer, you can take away someone’s freedom and their life. I expect you to be able to manage your emotions a little bit better than that.

Natalie paused, taking a sip of water. Marie waited for a White couple to walk past their table.

When they were out of earshot, Marie shared her own experiences with campus police:
I just did not have a good relationship with our Chief of Police. It was easily the most strained relationship I've had on campus. I questioned often if I really work with people that are just as concerned about what's happening to Black and Brown communities? The idea that our students are communicating this feeling of lack of safety or trust with law enforcement and that spills directly into their concerns about working with Campus Police. I found myself campaigning hard against Campus Police after many negative interactions that included police harassing Residence Life live-in staff of Color, handcuffing students with mental health concerns and drawing weapons upon entering Residential Halls and Apartments.

The two Black women looked at each other; the deep pain and exhaustion had given way to feelings of disappointment and defeat. The restaurant had gotten crowded; the booths near Natalie and Marie had been filled with laughing, chattering people. Waiters were rushing back and forth taking orders, bringing out food. A car alarm went off in the parking lot. Natalie and Marie did not seem to notice; the stress and pressure of the past 18-months weighed heavily on them. Natalie was the first to break the silence. Still looking down at her drink, she said:

It was your only option. What were you supposed to do, be cordial while being dismissed? No one else is speaking up for us or our marginalized staff or students; not even our White colleagues. We have to do it. And you know what, it causes me to question and doubt the real commitment to the cares and concerns of Black and Brown individuals on our campus.

You Can’t Get Blood From A Turnip Green/Everything Else…First

Natalie and Marie continued to sit in deep thought, embracing the silence. The racial reckoning and global pandemic had taken a toll on them both but there was also comfort in sitting together in silence, for once not being the only Black woman in the room, knowing the person across from you could relate to your experiences. After a moment of contemplation, Natalie looked up. Her facial expression was set. She knew she wanted to share this story,
something she had not shared with anyone before this moment. Her voice sounded a little hoarse as she started to share:

I had this dream that I got shot, that I was in a familiar place and somebody walked into the place and they shot, like a mass shooting. They didn't shoot me because I was Black, but I was there. They walked in and they shot me and my friends. And one person who is probably the closest to in that group was there. And I told her, I got shot, and she was like, oh, where are my kids? In my dream, she was so dismissive of the fact that I got shot, then, in my dream, I remember Blacking out. And then coming to and being like, I got shot, but I'm functioning, and then being like, I got shot. And it's like, you [Natalie’s friend] don't care. I keep telling you that there's an issue, you see clearly that there's an issue, we know that there's an issue. And now I am physically harmed by this issue and you don't care. You don't care at all? Do you care so little about me or about my experience? Do you not believe me and my experience so much, that when I walk up to you with a bullet hole in me, you're still dismissive? I think that was my psyche.

Natalie’s voice trailed off. In her mind, she could see the images from her dream again, could feel the pain she had felt in her dream, the disappointment in her friend’s response. She knew these dreams were a manifestation of her exhaustion and stress she felt daily as she worried about her family’s safety. Marie looked at Natalie, deeply saddened by Natalie’s dreams but intrinsically relating to the fear they express. She could feel tears rising in the corners of her eyes, as she shared;

I just was so nervous about sending my Black son to the houses of White people, because I didn't know them that well. I wanted to make sure that my kid was treated well. So, I would always go and talk to the parents, you know, see if they had a confederate flag up, or if they had a Black Lives Matter sign in their yard. Obviously, that doesn’t tell you everything, but it tells you a little bit as you go into your relationship with someone. It [racial reckoning and police brutality] just made me more conscious about protecting my peace, to be very honest, and who I let into my circle, because we're already dealing with so much, I didn't need the extra stress.

Almost in tears now, Marie slowly whispered, “I am not who I was before this pandemic.” She paused. The words had come before she could think about them, but she knew they were true. And she knew it was time to say them. She continued:
I’m learning to protect my peace. I have struggled to set personal and professional boundaries in the past however, I remember my friend repeating something I once said to her; “[Your employer] will repost your job before your obituaries are printed. So, don't let these people kill you. [Prior to the pandemic], work would always take the priority. And now I must realize I’m a wife and mother first. And those are the things that are important to me, however work is a part of my life. Work is important to help support my life, but work is not my life.

Marie paused. Saying these things out loud, sharing them with her friend, reaffirmed her commitment to her new way of life. She would not let work take over her life anymore. She would not go back to “normal”. Natalie nodded. Similar thoughts had crossed her mind. Slowly, still processing, she said:

As African American women, we put everybody in front of us. And I think for me, the pandemic has forced me to push myself to the front of the line, and that is ok. My grandmother would always say ‘you can’t get blood from a turnip green.’ I didn’t understand it then, but now I do. We must put ourselves first. We must, I mean, if just for our own wellness and mental health, whether we have children or not, we deserve to be happy, we deserve to be whole, we deserve to, to be our best. And sometimes our best is saying that this is not the right thing for me. And I do believe in my heart, the pandemic has uncovered a lot of that for people or there’s a lot of wrestling going on with, do I continue on this path? And that's okay.

There was an air of relief, of joy, of resistance, of resilience, as Natalie and Marie ended their reunion for the evening. For a few hours, they had felt understood and affirmed, connected by their common experiences, and shared identity as African American women. They had only scratched the surface in their short time together, but they knew there would be other times to connect, to share, to sit in solidarity. Before they stood up to leave, Marie grabbed Natalie’s hand as a gesture of gratitude, then mustered up enough strength and said, “I’m thinking of leaving the field, Natalie.”
Discussion

The intersections of sexism and racism shaped the lived experiences of this study’s participants, all of whom identified as African American women and served in Chief Housing Officer roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to their identity, participants encountered and wrestled with unique personal and professional challenges, which led them to re-evaluate how showed up at work. Similar to other residence life professionals, participants felt as if they were “eating glass and walking on fire,” while they were managing a pandemic. Their social-psychological well-being decreased, and they began to question their careers in residence life and whether they would continue in the field of Higher Education and Student Affairs (Nyunt, 2021; Thomas, 2021). Participants not only dealt with the trauma of the towering levels of stress due to the pandemic, but they also navigated and faced daily racism, sexism, and the intersections of these two oppressive systems.

Previous research highlights the difficulty women of Color face when trying to lead authentically in predominately White spaces due to their two socially constructed marginalized identities (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Eagly, 2005; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). Participants of this study shared experiences of walking into spaces where high stakes decisions were made during the pandemic to find that they were either the only person of Color or the only woman, but definitely the only African American woman. In these spaces, participants could not bring their full authentic self to the table, instead carefully weighing every word they said—they felt as though they were representing more than just themselves, they were representing their department and all African American women. Mindful of stereotypes, participants felt as though
they needed to shift, or code switch based on what stakeholders were in front of them and how open and vulnerable they felt they could be (Njoku & Evans 2022; Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). They had experienced bias and discrimination in these spaces (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Njoku & Evans, 2022) and knew that may happen again. While the lack of representation stood out clearly in participants’ minds, they were unsure whether their colleagues noticed the issue. This question created an additional layer of stress for participants, further limiting their ability to be their authentic self, an authentic leader.

While participants grappled with how to show up as a leader, they also encountered immense pressure to succeed. Similar to previous research on African American women leaders (e.g., McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Woods-Giscombé, 2001), the findings of this study highlight the pressure and fear of failure, stress, and high expectations African American women feel when serving in leadership roles in predominately White spaces. Participants specifically noted feeling as if the people around them were waiting for them to fail as African American women in leadership roles. African American women often believe their professional success is connected to the impact they are having at their places of employment, which increases this pressure (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; West, 2015). Participants were not willing to let their department or institution fail; instead, they agreed to take on additional leadership responsibilities, filled in for staff who were uncomfortable completing tasks during the pandemic, and tried to single-handedly keep their departments functioning smoothly. The constant juggling of responsibilities, while exhausting (Boushey, 2007; McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2021), allowed the participants to be creative and resourceful (Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017; Patton, 2009).
Creativity and resourcefulness were needed as participants took on additional labor within the leadership of the campus during the COVID-19 pandemic, labor that was often closely intertwined with their identities. Research on African American women faculty highlights the additional labor African American women take on (Griffin, 2013; Njoku & Evans, 2022). Specifically, African American women faculty tend to have heavier teaching and service loads and are expected to be more available and serve as the “go-to person” for African American students in comparison to their men faculty counterparts (Griffin, 2013; Hawley, 2008; Marine & Alemán, 2018; Njoku & Evans, 2022). Similarly, participants in this study stepped up to represent the interest of students, staff, and faculty of Color in relation to university decision making during the pandemic, despite the emotional and cognitive labor of such work in predominately White spaces. They were tapped to take on additional tasks, such as serving on diversity-related committees, or providing advice and crises management for the entire institution, not just their department. Participants also felt the need to check in with students and staff of Color to make sure they were ‘safe and in a good space’ especially during the intense racial reckoning period the nation was facing. This additional labor led to participants working long hours, going far beyond what can reasonably be expected of an individual. That lack of care caused the participants, to question the commitment of ‘who cares for Black and Brown individuals’, which ultimately increased the labor of care onto the African American women to serve for the students of Color on campus (Griffin, 2013; Warren-Gordon & Graff, 2018).

Serving as advocates for communities of Color, participants carried the emotional and mental weight of this work while also facing sexism and racism themselves on a daily basis (Quaye et al., 2020). Specifically, when engaging with Campus Police, participants recalled the
never-ending struggles, noting the lack of care, empathy, and compassion for the students of Color experience with police departments on college campuses. Such experiences can lead to racial battle fatigue, the physical, mental, and emotional stress of coping with overt racism for people of Color and the constant stream of microaggressions (Arnold et al., 2016). African American women may be particularly at risk of experiencing racial battle fatigue, as they not only encounter bias and discrimination due to their race but also their gender and the intersections of the two (Parker, 2005; Ruiz et al., 2020). Racial battle fatigue, in turn, has been linked to decreases in mental health and well-being for professionals of Color (Quaye et al., 2020). One participant shared the dream of being shot in a familiar place, with familiar people, and no one coming to her aid. This led her to believe that if this happened in real life, no one in her close circle of work or social friends who were White, would help, support, or stand up for her. Her dream highlights the negative impact her experiences as an African American woman in a leadership role had on her mental health. Racial battle fatigue ultimately drains individual’s energy and leads them to feel isolated and alone (Bowser, 2020).

Their inability to lead authentically, the immense pressure to succeed, unrealistic workloads, and racial battle fatigue pushed participants to reevaluate their priorities and how they showed up at work and home. Many African American women, due to psychosocial and cultural factors, have focused on the needs of others, first, and made personal needs, health, and social needs, second (McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2021; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Prior to the pandemic, work would almost always take priority in participants’ lives. The pandemic heated racial debates, and trauma of police brutality led participants to reflect on the impact that putting their needs second was having on them, professionally and personally. Pushing themselves to the
front of the line was not an easy choice for participants but consistently making self-care a last priority was no longer an option (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). No longer the same people they were before the pandemic, participants set personal and professional boundaries, changed how they showed up at work, or even considered leaving the field. Participants had reached their breaking point. While they had always done ‘hard things’, they were no longer willing to compromise their health – mental, physical or spiritual – any longer for their careers in student affairs. While setting firm boundaries or leaving the field may have been what was best for participants, this study’s findings thus highlight the serious consequences the stress and emotional toll of this 18-month period may have not only on individuals but a field that struggles to create pipelines for diverse staff to senior leadership roles. Positions such as the Chief Housing Officer role, often lead to the senior most Student Affairs role at 4-year institutions (Biddix, 2011). Few African American women serve as Chief Housing Officers at 4-year institutions (ACUHO-I, 2019). If these women chose to leave the field, the pipeline to SSAO position will inherently become less diverse.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

This study has several implications for future research and practice. The current study focuses solely on an 18-month timestamp which concludes at the beginning of the second academic year; August 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the surge of the Delta variant. Women, and particularly African American women, often feel the additional pinch in leadership roles and are frequently tapped to do more. Institutions should evaluate their policies
and protocols to ensure both men and women in leadership roles are carrying similar workloads and ‘extracurricular’ activities in their leadership roles.

Future research should study the role of African American women in Chief Housing Officer roles, pre and post pandemic. A more longitudinal study could explore if resolutions to prioritize personal well-being lasted beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and how African American women continued to negotiate professional and personal boundaries as COVID restrictions were lifted. A more longitudinal study could also provide insights into the experiences of African American women in Chief Housing Officer positions.

Regarding implications for practice, this study highlights the need to change how higher education institutions operate to better support African American women. Considering the additional labor participants engaged in, institutional leadership and supervisors should provide additional resources and support to African American women in leadership positions. Supervisors and Divisions of Student Affairs should be cognizant of the impact of inequitable demands and requests of African American women in leadership roles at Predominately White Institutions. Additional labor should be rewarded, while mechanism need to be put in place to allow for African American women to take on this work instead, not in addition, to other responsibilities.

To retain staff of Color and African American women in leadership roles, institutions need to own their values espoused around diversity, equity, and inclusion to create opportunities for diverse educators and the promotion of equity and inclusion. Institutions need to ensure that all their employees contribute to creating an inclusive and true sense of belonging environment.
For example, campus police departments should be required to participate in bias and discrimination, social and racial justice trainings, to better serve the entire university population.

Findings and research also note that immense emotional and mental effects of racial battle fatigue on staff of Color, often forces leaders to repress their experiences and emotions. Institutions should ensure there are safe spaces and structures in place for African American women to disclose, discuss and seek support for their experiences without fear of retaliation or termination. Providing spaces and opportunities for leaders to discuss their experiences openly, provide feedback and make the necessary changes at a local and institutional level is needed and opening the door for colleagues and allies step in and step up in to share in addressing inequities, mentoring and additional labor. Finally, leaders are in the spotlight, even when they may not know it. They should role model healthy behaviors for their staff and students. In support of that, institutions should consider a well-being plan or work life balance team to promote healthy work and lifestyles to ensure the longevity and tenure of their diverse staff members.

Conclusion

This research provides insights in the ways in which racism and sexism and the intersections have influenced African American women in Chief Housing Officer Roles at Predominately White Institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic heated racial debates and the trauma of police brutality exacerbated the experiences of African American women in Chief Housing Officer roles at PWI’s, which only compounded the impact that the intersectionality of racism and sexism played into the workplace. Institutions and Divisions of Student Affairs should be
cognizant of the impact of inequitable demands and requests of African American women in leadership roles at Predominately White Institutions. As institution’s strive to diversify their leadership in Chief Housing Officer and SSAO positions to create a more inclusive campus community, they need to ensure African American women feel supported in their leadership roles. Institutions need to also own their values espoused around diversity, equity, and inclusion to create opportunities and space for diverse educators and the promotion of equity and inclusion.
CHAPTER 3

SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

Introduction

I began my dissertation journey in June of 2019 when we were assigned a Case Study for the CAHA 590 course. I knew when I joined the doctoral program at NIU, I wanted to focus my dissertation on either my lived experiences as an African American woman who had spent almost 17 years in Housing and Residential Life or on the lived experiences and navigation of university resources for faculty and staff with chronic or terminally ill diseases. As a cancer survivor, patient, and staff member who struggled to find appropriate resources, I wanted to add to the body of literature. However, after many hours of research and lack of scholarly articles to utilize in my research, I decided to focus my research on my current work and identity.

Since June 2019, I’ve continued to collect and build my literature in anticipation of the dissertation process. When asked for our dissertation topics, I immediately had a body of literature, scholarly articles, resources, and my own work to pull from. When I chose my dissertation topic in January 2020, I had just left my role as Director of Residential Life at Northwestern University and transitioned to another B1G Ten Housing Director role at the University of Maryland College Park, where I had finished my first semester. I was in, what I referred to as the ‘academic zone’ and was sure I would be able to complete the dissertation in
the course timeline, if not before. That was before the COVID-19 pandemic and the personal bumps and bruises I’ve experienced since beginning this process.

The Beginning

I was certain that when I picked my topic, I would be able to utilize a qualitative case study approach. As I continued to flush out my dissertation topic with my dissertation chair, it was suggested that I explore narrative inquiry as the methodological approach for my research. During our previous courses, I focused my time and energy learning about qualitative case studies and gather resources to utilize for my study. As I continued to learn that narrative inquiry studied the lived experiences of participants through listening, observing, writing, living alongside one another and interpreting texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I knew that it was the perfect approach for me to use in relation to the lived experiences of African American women in Chief Housing Officer roles at Predominately White Institutions (PWI’s).

As a member of the group, I would be researching, I decided to include myself in the study, creating an autoethnographic element. And on my journey, I also learned about intersectionality and Critical Race Theory. I purchased and read countless amounts of literature regarding narrative inquiry. I was excited to draft my proposal, to dream about ways of engaging other African American women in similar positions and visit them on their campuses to better understand their institution's culture, their staff and hear their stories 1-1, to understand how they landed in their roles. Was their journey similar to mine? In a way, I looked forward to creating the sisterhood in Housing and Residential Life that I was missing at my current employer and
had missed for several years. I looked forward to dissecting their stories and retelling them in a
dynamic way. But then, in March 2020, COVID-19-19 forced us to shut down our institutions
and focus on the crisis at hand.

What Happened Next

In early Spring 2020, I was managing a change management process for my department
and bringing them along slowly, while spending my evenings and weekends reading, taking
notes, and thinking about my research, and spending time with my partner who was studying at
Georgetown for the year from the UK. When COVID-19-19 forced institutions to close in March
2020, it inherently changed the way that we operated at the macro institutional level and micro
departmental level. COVID-19 and its impact changed everything.

It is hard for me to remember what happened without needing to unearth the repressed
emotions, feelings, and pain that I buried during that period. COVID-19-19 before the Black
Lives Matter Movement and racial reckoning was more than many of us could handle. The
pressure and stress to produce, be available, remain calm, support students and staff and be a
leader became the everyday call to action for 18 long months.

My attention and energy were being pulled in many different directions. My personal life
no longer existed outside of the zoom screen. The pandemic forced us into our houses and for
those of us who did not live near family or many friends, created a void and isolation. I admit
that in that isolation, I threw myself into work and focused on how I could be a better, stronger,
ingenious, empathetic leader for my institution, division, department and for the 12,000 students, staff and families that depended on our department to monitor their health and safety.

I lost myself in my work and barely touched my dissertation until it was time to select my committee in October 2020. And after that, battled COVID-19 and another major surgery. After many personal and professional setbacks, I was able to propose my dissertation in June 2021, months later than what I originally had planned. I was disappointed but committed to finishing my degree.

What Went Well

After many edits, zoom calls and advice from my Dissertation Chair, I was able to clean up my interview protocols and narrow down potential participants. Many of the ideas around my dissertation shifted due to the ongoing pandemic, including a visit to each participants campus where we would build of rapport, tour their residential facilities, discuss their lived experiences on campus and their relationships with divisional leadership, their staffs, faculty, and students. I realized that I could still have a portion of the connection with my participants that I craved utilizing the zoom platform and rescoping my questions. I spent a weekend in Richmond, VA working through my protocols, drafting outreach to participants, and creating a realistic timeline for myself. That weekend, spent with a good friend, colleague and fellow doctoral student, attributed to the reignition of the spark I once felt for the program, my dissertation topic, and my love for learning.
I quickly gathered my participants, set up their initial zoom calls and got to work. Before I could begin their interviews, I needed to test my protocols to make sure the questions flowed smoothly and were in the correct order. As an autoethnographic participant, I completed my interview first. During that interview, I realized how much I hadn’t processed during the multiple pandemics that we were living through. I had spent most of the pandemic buried in work, not taking care of myself physically, mentally, or spiritually. I had put everything and everyone in front of me. This interview was my personal moment of awakening.

After I completed round one of my interviews, I began to code while listening to the transcriptions via hand and via NVivo. There was so much to unpack after interview one and I felt a little unsettled and triggered. Many of the participants, including myself, experienced difficult, traumatic situations, which included sexism and racism, from other leaders at our institutions. I personally buried the emotions and stress that I had felt during that period, as a coping mechanism, to move forward at work and in my personal life. I didn’t know how to cope with the emotions I felt after the first round of interviews and once again buried my emotions to move forward. For me to make my personal timeline, interviews needed to commence the following week. I completed round two of interviews the following week and interviews lasted anywhere between 45 to 90 minutes. My time with the participants was their time. I did not rush them. I soaked in our time together and was reminded that African American women are resilient.
What Would I Do Differently?

Post interviews, I immediately was pulled into a COVID-19 crisis. This time, with my own family in North Carolina. My mother, brother and father all were diagnosed with COVID-19 and my mother was in the hospital for 10 days in the Intensive Care COVID-19 unit. I had not touched my dissertation interviews while I was home helping to take care of my family and realized then, I would not make the December 2021 graduation. Life is short and precious, and we are not promised tomorrow. In September 2021, I learned what was most important to me after 18-months of battling recurring tumors, cardiac issues, and a scary month of hypoparathyroidism. There was a quote shared about ‘your job being reposted before your obituary was posted’ that really resonated with me. Learning to put myself at the front of line was not an easy journey and my health was always secondary to my work, my family, and the needs of others.

I also realized that I could no longer stay in my current role in Housing and Residential Life. I describe this moment as an awakening or catalyst. My health had suffered greatly during the pandemic and I couldn’t imagine anything in my current work atmosphere shifting to support my needs without also feeling the guilt of taking time away during a time when my department and division needed a present leader Even though I had never imagined stepping away or leaving the field of Higher Education, I made the tough decision to leave my role in Housing and Residential Life, mid-semester, after 17 years to take care of myself.

Many have asked if my decision to leave Housing and Residential Life, Student Affairs and Higher Education was related to the stress we felt during the pandemic or the intersections of
racism and sexism I dealt with during my time in Student Affairs. And honestly, my decision was more personal than that. I want to be healthy enough to make it to my 40th birthday and beyond. While stress is inevitable in every aspect of life, I attribute the mountain of stress from my professional life as the contributing factor to my current health concerns.

During the next few months, I would listen to a portion of the second round of interviews, code a little and then take a break. Listening to the lived experiences of the participants gave me great data for my study, however, it was also personally triggering and deeply painful, leading me to not spend as much time digesting and facilitating the necessary steps to complete my dissertation on my original timeline. If I could do this again, I would not go weeks between coding. I would not let months go by without reaching out to my dissertation chair and providing updates and I would work harder to put the triggers and trauma that I experienced on a shelf to continue moving forward. While I would do that differently today, I am glad that I allowed myself to experience the emotions, empathize with my participants and re-evaluate how I was living my life.

Application to Professional Practice

There are several salient quotes from my research that resonated with me during the data collection stage of my study and continue to resonate with me today. One of my participants shared that “[Your employer] will repost your job before your obituaries are printed. So, don't let these people kill you.” As someone who lives with a chronic illness daily, her quote reminded me that it is ok to put myself first. Another participant shared the impact the pressure of work
and racial reckoning had on her emotionally through her dreams and her psyche. There were many nights where I cried and couldn’t sleep because of the stress, pressure, and pain that I was carrying.

I learned from my own work and my participants that setting firm boundaries and letting others know your boundaries is in fact professional and should be accepted in Housing and Residence Life. Before I left my role at the University of Maryland College Park, I instituted departmental standards around engagement, time away, zoom etiquette and the need to be available. Instead, I asked my department to block time on their calendar as no meeting zone time, to allow staff the opportunity to get work completed during the workday, to schedule time with a colleague to get coffee or simply time away from the screen in the new world of work. I’m extremely proud of those implementations as the intention was to center the staff member and not their work.

Application to Research

While researching different publications, I learned about the differences in deadlines for submissions, word, and page counts. It is difficult to determine which information to include when publishing research. As the researcher, the data felt relevant and necessary. Selecting a journal that aligns with my research, topic and methodology has been challenging. During the process, I noted that many journals require or ask for different sections that may or may not align with your structure or outline. In the end, I settled on a journal that seemed to align most closely
with the content of my study. Once I submit and hear back from a journal, I anticipate learning more about the publication process.

My research focuses on Housing and Residential Life professionals who are from a diverse population, African American women. The process of choosing a dissertation topic, exploring, and examining relevant research, to creating a study, has taught me how to be an ethical and conscious researcher. As a researcher, it was important for me humanize my study’s participants, spend time understanding their experiences and honor their stories. While I am not working in the field of higher education currently, I continue to use the skills gained during this process as I help clients ask the right questions to institute change in their organizations.

While there has been recent research published regarding the experiences of African American women in Chief Housing Officer roles at PWI’s, it does not cover the 18-month period of the pandemic. I do believe that my research is relevant now more than ever. As Higher Education and Student Affairs continues to rally from the financial and racial impact of COVID-19, they are also wrestling with the great resignation. My research is just the beginning of much-needed research in relation to African American women in leadership roles at PWI’s.

The research could be expanded to include areas outside of housing. It could also continue to include people of color in leadership roles. As the only African American woman on the leadership team for the Division and my own departmental Senior Staff; I surprisingly found it to be extremely isolating and lonely. While there is research that has focused on ‘the only one’, there is no research that has focused on that post COVID-19-19. In fact, we are still living during a pandemic and are not sure when the surges might end, so I would recommend research that
follows a group of African American women or people of color closely as we exit the pandemic and return to a new way of operating.

Conclusion

While there have been many starts, stops and three job changes during the Doctoral program, I believe that this process has made me a more competent, resilient, and empathetic scholar. The dissertation process allowed me to explore, dream and learn about ideologies I had only heard of in passing. As a life-long learner, reading, digesting, and researching became enjoyable again. I’ve been humbled by this experience and plan to continue to use my critical research skills to amplify the lived experiences of African American women not only in Chief Housing Officer roles, but in the workplace inside and outside of Higher Education. As I continue to grow and develop, I hope to one day provide the same motivation and coaching to other doctoral students and staff that I received during this process. I am grateful to have been a part of the Ed.D. cohort and know that I am a better person because of the practical skills and scholarly knowledge gained during this time.
REFERENCES


Howard-Hamilton, M. F., & Patitu, C. L. (2012). Decisions to make (or not) along the career path. In T. B, Jones, L. S. Dawkins, M. M. McClinton, & M. H. Glover (Eds.), *Pathways to higher education administration for African American women*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.


APPENDIX A

IRB APPLICATION
Approval Notice
Initial Review

16-Jul-2021

TO: Valronica Scales (01858775)
   Counseling, Adult and Higher Education

RE: Protocol # HS21-0468 “African American Women in Senior Leadership Roles in Housing and Residence Life”

In a preliminary review, the Initial Submission of the above named research protocol was determined to meet the definition of human subjects research according to the federal regulations. The submission was then reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board through the expedited review process under Member Review procedures on 16-Jul-2021. Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

Protocol Approval period: 16-Jul-2021 - 15-Jul-2022

It is important for you to note that as an investigator conducting research that involves human participants, you are responsible for ensuring that this project has current IRB approval at all times. If your project will continue beyond the above date, or if you intend to make modifications to the study, you will need additional approval and should contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety for assistance. In addition, you are required to promptly report to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems or risks to subjects or others.

Please note that the IRB has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

Informed Consent:
Unless you have been approved for a waiver of the written signature of informed consent, this notice includes a date-stamped copy of the approved consent form for your use. NIU policy requires that informed consent documents given to subjects participating in non-exempt research bear the approval stamp of the NIU IRB. This stamped document is the only consent form that may be photocopied for distribution to study participants.

If consent for the study is being given by proxy (guardian, etc.), it is your responsibility to document the authority of that person to consent for the subject. Also, the committee recommends that you include an acknowledgment by the subject, or the subject's representative, that he or she has received a copy of the consent form.

**You are responsible for retaining the signed consent forms obtained from your subjects for a minimum of three years after the study is concluded.**

**Continuing Review:**

Continuing review of the project, conducted at least annually, will be necessary until data collection is complete and you no longer retain any identifiers that could link the subjects to the data collected. Please remember to use your **protocol number** (HS21-0468) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

**Closing the Study:**

Please note that a **final report submission** should be created in the record in lieu of an annual continuation form if data collection has ended and the data are free of identifiers. The final report is a separate submission form in the list of options in the InfoEd record, and it may be submitted prior to the annual review deadline.

With all of this said, the IRB extends best wishes for success in your research endeavors!

Please see the RIPS website for guidance on the impact of COVID-19-19 on research (including face-to-face data collection) [https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/COVID-19/index.shtml](https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/COVID-19/index.shtml)
APPENDIX B

PRE-INTERVIEW SOLICITATION
Dear Potential Interviewee:  

Thank you for your interest in serving as an interview participant for my research study. As you know, I am a doctoral candidate at Northern Illinois University, and I am conducting a narrative inquiry on African American Women in Chief Housing Officer roles at Predominately White Institutions. I am contacting you to request your assistance in identifying potential participants for my dissertation research.

Eligible participants will:

(a) self-identify as African American  
(b) self-identify as womxn  
(c) have within the past two academic years or currently serve as the Chief Housing Officer or Director of their housing and residence life department.

Interested participants can complete the Chief Housing Officer participant profile by filling out a short survey found here and also at the link below. Participation in the study will include:

- Completion of the Chief Housing Officer participant profile  
- Submission of resume/curriculum vitae  
- 2 interviews conducted via the Zoom software between May and June (60-90-minute interviews)

I would be grateful for your support in helping me identify eligible participants for this study, or perhaps if you yourself are eligible and interested in participating. Feel free to forward this email and the information below to those that may be interested in participating. If you are
interested in the study findings, please let me know and I will be happy to share a summary of the study after the completion of the dissertation.

Sincerely,

Valronica M. Scales

Z1858775@students.niu.edu
valronica.scales@gmail.com
APPENDIX C

WOMEN OF COLOR CHIEF HOUSING OFFICER PARTICIPANT PROFILE
1. Your name

2. Date of Birth or Age Bracket

3. Race

4. Ethnic Background (i.e. Mexican, Chinese, Navajo etc.)

5. Please answer the question that best corresponds to you.

   a) I was born in another country (not born in the United States)

   b) I was born in the U.S., and both parents were born in another country

   c) I was born in the U.S., both parents were born in the U.S. and all grandparents were born in another country

   d) other please specify

(SKIP PATTERN: If Q5 = A, then ask

   5a. Birthplace

   5b. Age at Immigration

   5c. What is your first language? Primary language?)

6. What is your religious affiliation?

7. Marital/Partner Status (circle all that apply?)

   a) Single (never married)

   b) Married/Partnered/Civil Union
c) Remarried

d) Separated

e) Divorced

f) Widowed

8. What type of high school did you attend (circle one)?

   a) Public
   b) Private

9. Information about educational attainment.

   Year Awarded Major Field College /University

   a) Bachelor’s
   b) Master’s
   c) Doctorate
   d) Honorary

10. Please list the three positions you held prior to your current position

   Name of Institution/Organization:

   a) Type of Institution
   b) Title/Rank
   c) Date From/To

11. Please list professional, community, volunteer, campus, or other organizations in which you have served or are serving (i.e. institutional boards, community agencies, etc.)
12. What awards or recognitions have you received?

Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey!
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT
Study Title: African American Women in Senior Leadership Roles in Housing & Residence Life at Predominately White Institutions

Investigators
Name: Valronica M. Scales Dept: Education Phone: [Redacted]

Key Information
• This is a voluntary research study on the lived experiences of African American Women in Senior Leadership roles in Housing and Residence Life at Predominately White Institutions, focusing on the past 15 months.
• This 3-month study involves collection of demographic data from participants and two 60-90 minute interviews.
• The benefits include an opportunity to contribute to a growing body of literature revolving the African American Woman experience in Higher Education and Student Affairs; the risks include being potentially triggered by memories or questions posed by the researcher.

Description of the Study
The purpose of this narrative inquiry study is to explore the lived experiences of African American women in senior leadership roles in Housing and Residence Life at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). This study strives to bring voice to African American women’s unique leadership experiences in student affairs administration focusing on the ways that race and gender, and the intersection of race and gender, shape their experiences. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: Prior to the first interview, I will request the resume or curriculum vitae of each participant. These resumes or CVs will provide background information on the participants. Each participant will also include an instrument designed to collect demographic data related to each participant. Participants will participate in two interviews; the first and second interview will be 60-90 minutes. All interviews will take place via Zoom.

Risks and Benefits
The study has the following risks. First, there are no reasonably foreseeable risks. However, some questions may trigger an emotional response. In that event, I will provide reasonable resources, offer to pause and reschedule the interview if needed.

The benefits of participation are that participants will be able to pull from the research when discussing their experiences in the field of higher education and student affairs. They will also be able to identify with other African American women in similar roles. If possible, participants will be able to discuss their experiences during conversations with hiring managers, coworkers and recruiters in the field.
Northern Illinois University     Consent to
Participate in a Research Study

Confidentiality
The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. I will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you. However, you will be given the opportunity to review and approve any material that is published about you.

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

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact the researcher, Valronica Scales at [redacted] or faculty member Gudrun Nyunt at gnyunt@niu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at (815)753-8588.

Northern Illinois University policy does not provide medical treatment or compensation for treatment of injuries that may occur as a result of participation in research activities. The preceding information shall not be construed as a waiver of any legal rights or redress which the participants may have.

Future Use of the Research Data
After removing all identifying information from your data, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from you.

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.
I give my consent to be video recorded during the first and second 60–90-minute interviews for the research study.
APPENDIX E

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – INTERVIEW 1
Interview 1- Interview Protocol for Semi-Structured (60-90 mins)

Focus: Getting to know the participant

Online meeting software such as Zoom or Skype

Guide for interviewer will ensure consistency during semi-structured interview. Interviewer will use questions below to guide each interview.

I. Welcome, Introduction, Overview of Study, Confidentiality
   a. **Interviewer:** Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this research study. As a reminder, we are discussing African American women in Chief Housing Officer at Predominately White Institutions. Do you have any questions, at this time, about the consent process or the study?
   b. **Interviewer:** This interview is being recorded. Are you still ok with being recorded? If you would like to stop at any time, please let me know. Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this study. Let’s get started.

II. Introductory Question

   **Interviewer:** Thank you for sharing your resume and/or curriculum vitae with me.

   a. As part of the study, I am hoping to share your story as an African American woman and someone who now serves in a Chief Housing Officer role.
      i. Let’s start by talking about who you are?
      ii. How did you get interested in the field?
iii. What about your trajectory in the field? How would you describe your journey?

iv. Now, let’s discuss your current institution. How would you describe your university, division, and department to someone who is not familiar with your university or line of employment?

1. Determine university type (private/public, size, resources)

b. Please share with me personal and professional factors in your life that led to your career in Housing and Residence Life?

III. Overview of Housing and Residence Life roles

a. How long have you been in a Chief Housing Officer role within Housing and Residence Life?

i. Have you been at other institutions where you served in a similar role?

b. What types of opportunities to grow exist in your current role within Housing and Residence Life?

IV. Questions Regarding Identity

a. In your professional life, which aspects of your identity are most salient?

i. Prompt: Which identities play a prominent role in your work life)?

   ii. Prompt for specific aspects of identity – race, gender, intersection of race & gender

b. How does this compare to the aspects of your identity that are most salient in your personal life?
c. Can you please describe your experiences as an African American woman administrator in the field? At your current place of employment?

d. What challenges and/or opportunities have you experienced as an African American woman in leadership at your current institution? In Housing and Residence Life?

e. Although your institution is a PWI, how would you describe the representation of POC here?

f. How, if at all, does the diversity representation of your institution influence your experience in your role?
   i. Prompt: as the leader of the dept, as a member of senior administration, etc.

g. Are there additional identities that you would like to discuss?

V. Questions regarding relationships with peers

a. How would you describe your relationship with your colleagues?
   i. Supervisor and other cabinet level colleagues?
   ii. Supervisees?
   iii. Staff members?

b. How would you describe your relationship with your peers?
   i. In the same reporting as you?
   ii. Senior leadership team members or other Directors?

VI. Questions Regarding Perceived Success
a. Are there professional strategies that you utilize that contribute to your success in your current role?

b. What advice would you give to other Black/African American women who seek senior leadership positions in Housing or Residence Life at PWIs?
APPENDIX F

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – INTERVIEW 2
Interview 2- Interview Protocol for semi-structured interview (60-90 mins)

Focus: Understanding the participants experiences in the field

Via digital platform

I. Welcome, Introduction, Overview of Study, Confidentiality
   a. **Interviewer:** Thank you for continuing in the study. As a reminder, we are
discussing African American women in Chief Housing Officer roles at
Predominately White Institutions. Do you have any questions, at this time, about
the consent process or the study?
   b. **Interviewer:** “You received a copy of the transcript of what you shared in the
first interview. I want to make sure that my transcript accurately reflects your
experiences – in reviewing the transcript, is there anything that you would like me
to change? Or is there anything that you think I need to add to more accurately
represent your experiences?”
   c. **Interviewer:** This interview is being recorded. Are you still ok with being
recorded? If you would like to stop at any time, please let me know. Again, thank
you for agreeing to be a part of this study. Let’s get started.

II. Questions Regarding Role Advancement
   a. In your opinion, is there an ideal career path to senior leadership in Student
   Affairs?
      i. Does the ideal path to senior leadership differ for African American
women? If so, how?

III. Questions Regarding Retention in Role
a. How long do you plan to stay in your current role in Housing and Residence Life?

b. Where do you see yourself in five or ten years?

c. Can you please share your largest sources of support personally and professionally?

d. How have those sources of support allowed you to be successful in your role?

Focus: Impact of COVID-19 & BLM and intersections of personal and professional life

I. Interviewer: I’d like to spend some time together discussing your relationships with your colleagues and peers and how you feel those relationships have impacted you in your current role in relation to COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and political unrest.

II. Questions regarding relationship impact on experience

a. How (if at all) do you feel relationships play a significant role in your role as Senior leader within your department and or division?

b. How (if at all) have the relationships discussed above impacted your experience as a senior leader?

III. Questions regarding today’s unrest, pandemic, and financial uncertainty

a. How (if at all) have you been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic:

   i. Within your role?

   ii. Within your personal life?

   iii. Other?

b. How (if at all) have you been impacted by the racial and social injustice that the US is grappling with?

   i. How did this impact your work?
ii. If you’re willing to share, did it impact your personal life?

c. How (if at all) have you been impacted by the financial uncertainty that many institutions have experienced?

   i. How did this impact your work?

   ii. If you’re willing to share, did it impact your personal life?

IV. Is there anything that was not discussed during our interviews that you would like to share at this time?

V. Thank you for being a participant in my dissertation study.
APPENDIX G

POST INTERVIEW DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY
Post-interview questionnaire was sent to participants post final interview.

I. Pronouns

II. Age Range

III. Salient Identities

IV. Degrees Completed

V. Institutional Type

VI. Institutional Enrollment (Undergrad/Grad)

VII. Residential Student Population

VIII. Geographical Region of Institution

IX. # of Professional Staff within Department

X. # of Student Staff within Department