

Exploring the Meaning of Doctoral Completion for African American Females Who Have
Attended a Predominantly White Institution

Devara D. Brock

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

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Approved by:

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Abstract

As evidenced by the average doctoral student turnover rate, pursuing a doctorate degree may be exceedingly difficult. African American women (AAW) in particular, tend to face unique challenges in higher education due to their gender and racial identities, yet because of their perceived success in comparison to their Black male counterparts, their doctoral experiences at predominantly White institutions (PWI) frequently go overlooked. Furthermore, considering the impact that trauma can have on higher education success, it is crucial to better understand the intricate nature of the doctoral experiences of AAW to determine how to further facilitate their success. To add to the existing literature, the present qualitative phenomenological study sought to amplify the doctoral experiences of eight AAW and how they describe the meaning of graduating with a doctoral degree from a PWI. The personal narratives of these Black women were collected via semi-structured interviews and summarized utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, guided by the conceptual frameworks of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1989) and Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Study implications, limitations and suggested future directions are also discussed.

Keywords: Black women, trauma, doctoral persistence, higher education, (predominantly white institution) PWI, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)

Dedication

I am dedicating this manuscript to my family, my great cloud of witnesses. My parents, Duke and Dorothy Brock, it was in your deaths that I encountered my first adverse childhood experience (ACE). Thank you for all your hugs, kisses, and love you freely gave your baby girl. Both my paternal and maternal grandparents, you all instantaneously stepped in with your unconditional love, raising me to trust God, instilling the importance of establishing my own personal relationship with Him, and teaching me the Word of God. Thank you all for providing a seamless transition in my life after the deaths of my Mama and my Daddy. My aunt and uncles, you all loved and spoiled me, while instilling a confidence and mental toughness in me that has shaped me to be able to withstand any challenge that comes my way. Mom Wyatt, you were passed the baton from Heaven to keep me encouraged as life took many turns for me. Thank you for accepting the blessing and loving me as your daughter.

To my earthen family: my nephew and nieces, Marquis, Marquia, and Marquisha, thank you for loving your TT. Each of you inspire me with your unique selves coupled with traits and characteristics of your mother. My gifts from God, J'Quia, Brianna, and Jalyn. I pray that you are proud to call me Mama because I am beyond grateful to be your Mama. Mema's angels, Sania, Brielle, A'Chaunti, Kayden, Chaya, Arielle, Tre, and Bria, please know that you can do anything you put your heart and mind to, just give it to God, and He will establish it. I love you all.

My sister, Renetta K. Brock:

sometimes
there
are
no
words.



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List of Abbreviations

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

African American (AA)

African American Women (AAW)

Black Feminist Thought (BFT)

Critical Race Feminism (CRF)

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Predominantly White Institution (PWI)

Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

As shown by the average doctoral student turnover rate, pursuing a doctorate may be exceedingly difficult. African Americans (AAs) are neglected at the doctorate level, according to the literature. Underrepresentation is particularly difficult for AA female doctoral candidates, who face a "double bind" (Ong et al., 2011) due to their racial (e.g., Black) and gendered (e.g., woman) categorization. In sectors where they are the sole person of color or woman of color, they face even more discrimination, alienation, and disconnection (Jones et al., 2020). Because African American women (AAW) obtain more doctorates than African American males, it is believed that they are thriving, and their experiences at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are frequently overlooked. The dearth of understanding of a black woman's doctorate experience is an example of one of the issues that black women confront, which have been frequently neglected and disregarded from student experiences discussions. The goal of this research was to give voice to the distinctive experiences of Black women seeking doctoral degrees at PWIs to better understand the interplay of barriers and facilitating mechanisms associated with degree persistence and attainment. The researcher was also interested in exploring the role of trauma within these experiences to uncover the specifics of how Black women's experiences with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) may positively manifest in academic environments. Specifically, this study sought to examine the presence and role of trauma, barriers, and facilitators in the doctoral experience for AAW, as well as the overall meaning of these experiences for Black women. It was the hope that by using intentional and culturally sensitive practices to document this information, a more accurate representation of doctoral experiences

for AAW could be obtained, as well as facilitate conversations surrounding the necessary supports for current and future female doctoral students of color at PWIs.

Existing literature depicting Black female doctoral or graduate experiences have often reflected the perceptions of individuals who tend to hold more dominant positions within society (e.g., White women, Black men) and “recast” Black female narratives to serve the interests of academia (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015). These practices result in the dissemination of information that is often objective and generalized, and that which reflects an additive perspective of the oppressions associated with multiple marginalized identities, rather than an intersectional perspective that highlights the complexity of Black women’s experiences (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015).

Background

Historical Background

Black women have long been excluded and isolated members of society. With their racial and gender affiliation belonging to minoritized groups within the larger, White- and male-dominated society, their experiences represent the unique intersections of these identities. The confluence of race and gender puts AAW in a position to be commonly misunderstood, and as such, their experiences have largely been ignored within broader social activist movements (Brewer, 2001; Porter & Byrd, 2021). For example, for a large portion of the feminist movement, dating back to the 1970s, Black women were not acknowledged or regarded as equal counterparts, despite their historical subjugation in society (Mason, 2015). Black women are frequently relegated to the bottom of multiple subgroups in society, and their experiences have been poorly documented in the literature, written from the perspectives of scholars unfamiliar with the complexities of their true experiences, who often interpret their oppressions as additive

versus intertwined (Brewer, 2001). Furthermore, established theoretical contributions from women of color (e.g., Black feminist thought [BFT]; Collins, 1989) are usually only considered a unique perspective within broader White feminist theory, as opposed to being perceived as representative of what broader feminism theory should encompass and holding equal weight in program curricula. These practices have contributed to the underrepresentation of AAW's ideas and outlooks in academia and the perpetuation of systemic injustices embedded within institutions of higher education (Wagner, 2008).

Social Background

Women of color have constantly struggled to legitimize themselves within academic settings, holding “outsider-within” status in these communities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). White and male voices often dominate the educational discourses at PWIs, and despite purportedly valuing the innovation of ideas and creation of new knowledge, Black women's ideas, experiences, and values are routinely disregarded and dismissed for not aligning with these dominant theories and perspectives at their institutions (Collins, 2000). Black women often are forced to endure toxic conditions in these settings, also having to combat and overcome frequent microaggressions from faculty and peers, the absence of adequate mentorship and financial support, and little-to-no diversity among program faculty (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015). Black women with lower socioeconomic status and those who are first-generation students, may be even more disadvantaged by a lack of college preparedness and inadequate economic and academic assistance from their families, in spite of other areas of familial support (Commodore et al., 2018). As a result, many Black women feel disregarded, undervalued, frustrated, and isolated while seeking their doctoral degrees, increasing the likelihood of attrition among this marginalized group of women, as well as the manifestation of detrimental physical and mental

health outcomes (Torres et al., 2010). The call to address these environments that are often sites of trauma (Kirkinis et al., 2021) for Black women is not new; however, few mechanisms have been successful at eliminating accessibility barriers and improving social conditions for this marginalized group. Interestingly, while sufficient supports for AAW in their doctoral programs and substantial changes to literary practice to improve the authentic documentation of the Black female voice and their representation in the literature have yet to be realized, many Black women persist to degree completion (Felder & Barker, 2013).

Theoretical Background

Much of the existing body of scholarly theory has been rendered insufficient to account for the complexities of Black women and their interlocking identities and advance the necessary understanding of their experiences during their doctoral careers (Collins, 2002). However, when exploring these areas, BFT (Collins, 1989) is often the theory of choice, as it highlights the similarities among Black women's experiences, as well as the diversity inherent within the collective group. BFT understands the role of the overarching hegemonic structures in society in the oppression of Black women and the historical replacing of the rich personal experiences of AAW with inaccurate, condescending narratives. BFT prioritizes the thoughts, ideas, and empowerment of Black women, and their reproduction is considered representative of Black feminism. As the latter implies, BFT is a constantly evolving, self-defining theory, which is in direct contrast to the idea of theory as static, which is the school of thought commonly relied on in academia to support knowledge (re)production. Critical race theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) builds on BFT by providing a method of inquiry that specifically accounts for the role of power dynamics, race, and racism, among other forms of oppression, within society. The idea of counter-storytelling, much aligned with the emphases of BFT on activism as a

method of resistance to oppressive structures, equally reflects the goal of this research, which is to highlight Black female voice within the context of academia. Together, BFT and CRT can provide a conceptual framework to accurately interpret the personal narratives of Black women in academia to uncover the mechanisms that enable them to persist toward completing their doctoral degrees despite recurring obstacles (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Situation to Self

My desire to conduct this study was to highlight the voices of Black women on their accomplishment of obtaining the highest educational degree possible, in the face of the ACEs/traumatic events they have encountered. Having experienced childhood trauma, it is humbling to have beat the statistics and be in the process of obtaining a doctoral degree. It was my hope that heralding the stories of these Black women would be encouragement, motivation, and inspiration for other Black women to pursue, persist, and achieve a doctoral degree. I also hoped to allow space for healing to take place, as needed, as the participants reflected and reminisced on their resilient nature that allowed them to Thrive After Adversity!

Slevitch (2011) stated that ontology (onto in Greek “being” and logia “science, study, theory”) can be defined as the study of reality or things that comprise reality. Epistemology refers to “the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge and the process by which knowledge is acquired and validated” (Gall et al., 2003, p. 13). It is concerned with “the nature and forms [of knowledge], how it can be acquired and how communicated to other human beings” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 7). My desire to conduct this study was informed by my belief that regardless of experiencing childhood trauma, as a Black woman at a PWI, you can endure and attain a doctoral degree. Your voice matters, your accomplishments matter, and you are heard!

Problem Statement

An unrelenting problem plaguing AAW is underrepresentation and neglect at PWIs (Ong et al., 2011). Despite AAW being the most frustrated and alienated students at PWIs, facing discrimination, alienation, and disconnection (Jones et al., 2020; Johnson, 2021), their accomplishments often overshadow their lived experiences, which remain to be heard adequately in the literature. As a result, their lived experiences are frequently disregarded, and associated needs are unmet. Black women face a host of challenges when seeking advanced degrees, and these challenges are in large part a result of their intersecting identities of race and gender, among others (Callan, 2018).

AAW doctoral candidates often do not have access to appropriate mentorship or support networks (Felder & Barker, 2013). Scholars have discovered positive support mechanisms that help in persistence toward degree completion to combat perpetual hurdles that hinder AAW graduate student achievement (Jones et al., 2020). Some academics claim that all AA graduate students require is enough money, approachable professors, and a supportive atmosphere in order to succeed (Millet & Nettles, 2006). It is critical to comprehend the inequities that endanger AAW doctoral students' educational achievements at PWIs, as well as the ways in which AAW students resist these barriers. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of research on AA doctoral students' specific experiences at PWIs and even less on the experiences of AAW. The goal of this research was to give voice to the distinctive experiences of Black women in doctoral programs at PWIs and to specifically investigate the role of trauma among their perceived barriers and facilitators to doctoral degree completion.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better understand the experiences of Black women obtaining their doctoral degrees at PWIs, while specifically taking into account the role of trauma, barriers to completion, and facilitators for completion. At this stage in the research, doctoral completion is generally connoted as degree completion of AAW doctoral students who have been studied at PWIs. BFT (Collins, 1989) and CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) guided the implementation of this study, as its primary goal was to amplify the unique voices of AAW who have obtained their doctoral degrees. The researcher's interest in providing a platform for AAW to narrate their personal experiences, while emphasizing their perceptions of the various mechanisms at play that contributed to these experiences, contributed to the creation of counter-narratives, which directly aligned with the tenants of both BFT and CRT.

Significance of the Study

The present study sought to bridge the gap between the lived experiences of Black female doctoral students and their representation within the literature, in an effort to present a more accurate and complete picture of Black female academic culture (Jones et al., 2020). The study was based on the counter-narrative aspect of the CRT, which empowers participants' perspectives to be acknowledged in scholarly investigation, bridging the gap where Black women's voices have been muted in literature (Curry, 2011). Despite the historical evidence of the successes of Black women, their experiences are often negatively depicted in the literature, offering little information about how Black women persevere toward degree attainment in institutions of higher education in spite of myriad obstacles. Furthermore, as prior experiences with trauma (i.e., ACEs) are common among the college-aged population, especially for women of color (Watson et al., 2016), it has the potential to further negatively impact these experiences

as well. Interestingly, Black women's experiences with trauma have been shown to function as a facilitating mechanism, encouraging growth, motivation, and determination, among other things (Chance, 2022). While many of the aforementioned factors are associated with positive outcomes, less is known about how traumatic experiences can actually shape Black women's experiences in higher education, a setting that often reproduces various structures of social dominance, and one in which Black women and other people of color are often ostracized (Chance, 2022). The current study sought to better understand the interplay of these mechanisms related to how Black women find meaning in their doctoral careers and to what degree trauma operates as a facilitating mechanism or barrier to doctoral persistence. This project was significant in that it examined an area not very widely studied and did so using first account personal narratives. This method of inquiry is less commonly used, yet offers rich information and allows the Black women being interviewed an opportunity to self-define their experiences and identities, placing an emphasis on participant-centered practices. It was the researcher's expectation that by intentionally designing this investigation to center the experiences of Black women, it would provide a platform for the sharing of these personal accounts, further giving voice to a group who has been historically marginalized and silenced. These accounts had the potential to confirm and encourage current Black female doctoral students at PWIs (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and create conversation around the need for changes within doctoral programs and institutions to better support women of color.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do African American females with at least one adverse childhood experience describe the meaning of graduating with a doctoral degree from a predominantly White institution?

RQ2: How do African American females with at least one adverse childhood experience describe the process they went through to overcome barriers to graduate with a doctoral degree from a predominantly White institution?

Definitions

1. *Black Feminism* - Black feminism is a phenomenon that examines race, gender, class, and color concerns as they affect Black women in society (Collins, 2020).
2. *Grit* - Grit is defined as trait-level tenacity and commitment to long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). It is a higher-order construct made up of two subscales: effort persistence and interest consistency (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009).
3. *Resiliency* - Resiliency is the capacity to bounce back from setbacks by overcoming roadblocks to completing certain activities and objectives (Morales, 2008).
4. *Self-efficacy* - Self-efficacy is an individual's conviction in his or her capacity to achieve a certain result, which may be used to affect behaviors, motivation, and ambitions (Bandura et al., 2001).

Summary

AAW doctoral students at PWIs face marginalization due to their racial (e.g., Black) and gendered (e.g., woman) classification. It is assumed that AAW are succeeding since they earn more doctorates than AA men, and yet, their experiences at PWIs are generally neglected. Due to the convergence of their beliefs, this academic group has a unique academic orientation, especially at a PWI. As a result, it is imperative to understand the biases that undermine AAW doctoral students' educational successes at PWIs, as well as the strategies in which they fight back by developing resiliency, grit, and self-efficacy. Furthermore, there is insufficient research on AA doctoral students' experiences in PWIs in general, and much less on AAW's experiences.

The lack of awareness of a Black woman's doctoral experience is an example of the exclusive issues that Black women face, which have been routinely overlooked and ignored in talks about student experiences.

The objective of this phenomenological study was to find out the meaning of graduating with a doctoral degree for an AAW with at least one ACE who attended a PWI. At this point in the study, doctoral completion referred to the completion of AAW doctoral students' degrees at PWIs. The influence of self-efficacy, grit, and resiliency on AAW students' academic tenacity and completion of doctoral degrees was investigated in this study. Collins' (2000) BFT and Yosso's (2002) CRT were the theories that guided this research.

This study attempted to bridge the gap between lived experiences of AAW doctoral students and their representation in the literature, which was deemed necessary. It focused on the doctoral completion of AAW at PWIs. The current research served as a theoretical foundation for future studies that seek to build on Black feminism or investigate the experiences of AAW at PWIs. This research may be used on a larger scale to make AAW doctoral students' counter-narratives heard and to improve their experiences at PWIs as students of color and gender. Furthermore, it may be advantageous to encourage current and future AAW doctoral candidates in degree completion and perseverance.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

While African American women (AAW) have made many contributions to higher education, they have received little recognition. Underrepresentation of Black women's experiences in higher education is quite evident, since their stories are typically perceived through the eyes of White women or Black men. Although they share experiences with both men of their race and Whites of their gender, the most essential component of being Black and a woman is their individualism. The preliminary review of the extant studies has highlighted that there is a lack of research regarding AAW graduate students with the view of their psychological well-being and the protective factors that enable them to succeed in the face of adversity. In this regard, the current literature review expounds upon the doctoral education experience, the barriers and challenges of doctoral education, and the institutional challenges and history of exclusion and isolation for AAW in academia. The current review is informed by critical race feminism (CRF) with the amalgamation of Black feminist thought (BFT) and critical race theory (CRT). The review focuses on psychological well-being of doctoral AAW within the lens of their adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma. In addition, difficulties and catalysts of persistence of AAW in doctoral programs, along with the protective factors that aid them to endure and succeed in the face of adversity, are also described in detail.

Theoretical Framework

Race and racism are essential themes to tackle in education, as they are engrained within the very framework that these institutions were built upon (source). However, scholars have contended that race is largely undertheorized in education (Seriki, 2018). Furthermore, to truly comprehend an individual's unique experiences, an investigation of the intersections of an

individual's various identities, especially one's race, gender, and social class, is essential because "race is classed and gendered, gender is raced and classed, and class is raced and gendered" (Green et al., 2018, p. 296; Holvino, 2010).

Thus, the current study was guided by the composition of BFT (Collins, 2000) and CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) to reflect a CRF lens. CRT posits that racism is profoundly embedded in the institutions that drive people's everyday activities in the United States, whether educational, social, or political (Croom & Patton, 2011). BFT combines both feminist and critical theories, allowing for an integrated understanding of Black women's experiences as a site of knowledge formation (Rankin & Irish, 2020).

Black Feminist Thought

Feminist theories usually emphasize women's repressive situations, questioning historically male-dominated areas; critical theories, similarly, challenge conventional perceptions, emphasizing minorities' experienced knowledge (Green et al., 2018). When investigating the claimed discontent and isolation among AAW graduate students, the interminable issue of racism in America, as well as the persistence of race and racism structurally integrated in White institutions, is critical to understand (Breines, 2006). In BFT, there are three major themes (Collins, 2002). First, despite the fact that others have chronicled their tales, the framework is molded and generated by the events that AAW have faced throughout their lifetimes (Henry et al., 2011). Second, although each woman's story and experiences are distinct, there exist the junctions related to experiences of AAW (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Third, even though there are similarities in AAW, the variety of class, age, religion, and sexual orientation of these AAW as a group provides numerous settings in which their experiences may be exposed and understood (Henry et al., 2010).

In terms of ideology, the identities of AAW in the United States were formed from a “socio-historical” viewpoint based on hierarchy, which positions them as lower to other groups involving White men and women, as well as Black men (Green et al., 2018). Nash (2008) demonstrated that AAW have the burden originated from the historic and contemporary perspective, which flourishes on the usage of multi-fold blends within the phraseology of “Black, female, and poor” individualities, which further places them in a marginalized and lower-placing status in comparison to the “White, male and elite” individuals of the society. In order to empower this marginalized section of society, BFT accentuates women's oppressive situations, questions historically male-dominated areas, and challenges conventional perceptions of Black females (Green et al., 2018).

Critical Race Theory

The CRT is an opposing context aimed at recognizing as well as destroying “White supremacy” in multiple foundations related to education, law, and society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT believes that racism is genuine and deeply rooted in the institutions that drive people's everyday activities in the United States, whether educational, social, or political (Croom & Patton, 2011). CRT researchers have argued that understanding current racial relations requires placing them in a historical framework that disturbs ahistorical portrayals of persons, policies, and events (Gillborn, 2005). They have argued that such viewpoints are flawed because they fail to account for history, discrimination, and prejudice, while depending on hard labor as the primary means of social development (Cabrera, 2018).

In education, CRT varies to some extent from the legal claims of the theory since it strives to address the entrenched racism and challenges the traditional structures, writings, and separate treatment of race, gender, and class in research by demonstrating the ways these social

constructs intersect to influence communities of color (Solórzano & Huber, 2020). Furthermore, it emphasizes on providing a redemptive and altering experience for African American (AA) people by delving into the various social and individual perspectives that comprise their individuality, for instance race, gender, and class (Yao et al., 2019). The stated theory is dedicated to a social justice-based program that aims to eradicate all kinds of injustice (Butcher & Gonzalez, 2020). This approach, however, is not free from criticism, due to its inability to profoundly address the intersections of race and gender, which calls for further work in this domain.

Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory

CRF is a subset of the greater CRT and feminist movements (Ward, 2021). CRF employs prejudice and racism as descriptive means for continuing injustices, in addition to considering that gender and sexism demonstrate dominating positions in AAW's failure to be regarded equally (Adams & Bell, 2016). CRF academics demonstrate that the interconnection of people's experiences based on several elements of their identity challenges the experience of AAW (Croom and Patton, 2011). Because of their social standing, critical race feminists have argued that the individual experiences of AAW have the capacity to offer intuitions for the larger societal environment. For instance, in education, the mutual experiences of AAW have the potential to expose the orderly consequences of "racism and sexism" (Renzetti, 2018). CRF, as a framework, contributes to overcoming the essentialism that often happens when research is undertaken under the garb of White women or Black males (Haynes et al., 2020).

AA students create educational and public counter spaces on campus by locating others who are their look-alikes in order to create a safe and welcoming environment for themselves (Ong et al., 2018). The counter space's major focus is on seeking refuge from the everyday flood

of microaggressions and being in a place that is affirming, comfortable, and helpful (West, 2019). Sufferers of racial discrimination may recognize their viewpoint upon the understanding and identification of racism and relevant racist issues (Maylor et al., 2021). Furthermore, victims of racism realize that in the suffering of marginalization and discrimination, they are not alone. This can empower them. Hearing their own stories from others that look like them and listening to the way their peers reflect on their experiences can help them articulate their own circumstances (Renzetti, 2018). Howard-Hamilton (2003) concurred clearly that “there is no more isolated minority in academe than Black women” (p. 26). Neither do they share the race nor the gender with the ones who belong to the decision-making strata of academia (i.e., White males). On the other hand, Black males share White males' superiority over women in academe as well as in society (Cazenave & Smith, 2017). This advocates for the integration of BFT and CRT in order to emphasize the concept of CRF to improve the possibilities for academic, personal, and professional success of AAW.

Related Literature

Barriers to Doctoral Education

Academic identity growth from student to research scholar is complicated and difficult, but it maintains a distinct pattern that starts with obtaining research competency and progresses to research confidence. Academic identity is identified in doctoral education research as a pathway through which a doctoral student progresses from student to scholar during the program. Departmental frameworks are often mentioned as an important aspect of the experience regarding doctoral degrees. Such frameworks consist of the ways to help students in social, financial, and intellectual manners, as well as offer prospects for professional growth by the department (Sverdlik et al., 2018). To enroll in a higher education degree program is expecting to

provide interim assistances, such as the delight of the educational involvement and heightened societal standing, as well as long-standing paybacks, such as advanced lifetime earnings, improved professional rank, positive employment circumstances, and a lesser likelihood of redundancy (Perna, 2004).

A substantial quantity of research has emphasized the financial advantages of enrolling in doctoral degrees (Gururaj et al., 2010). Financial support possibilities, such as debt, scholarships, grants, and work opportunities inside the institution profoundly affect the experience and well-being of doctoral students. Wao and Onwuegbuzie (2011) carried out a study in this regard, where they highlighted that most students demonstrate that they pursued the doctoral degree for academic reasons, but faculty believed that most students pursued the degree for economic reasons.

Doctoral study is a lengthy time of concentrated effort that helps to develop independent researchers, and the trip might be difficult (Barry et al., 2018). Sometimes, the community of practice fails to give enough support and shared control to doctoral students (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2020). This may result in ongoing harmful conflict among the learners and the educational atmosphere, which may lead to difficulties with their well-being (Usher & McCormack, 2021). Many doctoral students endeavor to reconcile social and family commitments with academic work, necessitating challenging decisions about priorities and resource allocation (Sverdlik et al., 2018). As a result, private living objectives, such as health and relationships, are repeatedly overlooked, which leads to feelings of disparity and disturbance (Gleason & Hays, 2019).

Pyhältö et al. (2012) highlighted four issues that doctoral applicants face, which include supervision and academic cooperation; sources; competence; and customary procedures. Others have raised concerns about supervisory relationships, including the possibility that stress and

tiredness might arise in case of incompatibility amongst a person and the educational circumstances (Stubb et al., 2011). In addition, resource concerns, such as a lack of financial living assistance and the increased familial and financial obligations faced by older doctoral students, have also been discussed (Hyun et al., 2006).

Exposure to varied obstacles also leads to a lack of support, which might be obtained through talking with other students who may be working on similar projects (Williams & Satherley, 2021). When support is lacking at this time of the doctoral journey, students may suffer emotions of bewilderment, loneliness, and discouragement, which may have a severe influence on their well-being, degree performance, and professional advancement (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019). Isolation, in particular, has been identified as one of the most significant obstacles for these students (Barry et al., 2018), which is experienced differently during different phases of the doctoral program (Ali & Kohun, 2006). Isolation is caused by three issues: a lack of communication, misunderstanding, and perplexity. It is a prominent issue that leads to lesser retention in graduate degree programs, as well as the effects related to loneliness and stress in graduate students (Cornér et al., 2017).

AA students confront additional hurdles as they strive to negotiate frameworks in which they are even more of a minority and are exposed to the inherent racism and oppression that often accompany higher education settings (McGee, 2020). When these challenges are combined with far-from-desired program entry rates (Campbell et al., 2020), these students are much less likely to succeed and even graduate (Allen et al., 2018).

Descriptive studies have often highlighted Black students' significantly poor persistence and graduation rates (Franke & DeAngelo, 2018). Historically, Black educational institutions are considered as a preference for students of color; however, Richards and Awokoya (2012)

highlighted that those AA students in such colleges, in particular, have much lower persistence rates than AA students at other institutions. Furthermore, problematic academic experiences significantly relate to worse academic success ratings (Gougis, 2020). Such lower success rates among Black students pose a danger to their academic results, particularly persistence (Lewis & Hunt, 2019). Furthermore, the “underrepresentation” of Black students in advanced and developed courses contributes to poor academic achievements (Allen et al., 2018). According to Okahana et al. (2018), Black students are played down in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) courses. This leads to the “under-education of black students which further fosters subordination, whilst the existence of a mediocre “race, sex and class” in one body determines the creed of unevenness among Black women (Farinde & Lewis, 2012).

Institutional Challenges in Doctoral Education

While educational institutions have directed resources toward increasing Black student admission and retention, many of these efforts focus on increasing diversity among faculty and staff rather than dismantling oppressive institutionalized structures to improve the quality of current students' doctoral careers (Mishra, 2020). Furthermore, less attention is devoted to how these experiences may vary for AA male and female students, as well as offering specific services for these two subgroups (Mello & Swanson, 2007; Welsh & Little, 2018). Despite the fact that Black males are the primary focus of higher education research (Funk & Parker, 2018), the doctoral degree experience for AAW may be much worse (Allen et al., 2019). Many Black women report experiencing extremely conspicuous in their campuses as a result of their various identification owing to their race and gender (McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). Hotchkins (2017) conducted research centered on the idea of "gendernoir," which defines the complex encounters regarding race-based weariness at the junction being Black women. Black women in

American culture often bear the combined responsibilities of race and gender and are obliged to face unfavorable images of themselves (Shavers & Moore, 2019).

According to the literature, doctoral education may result in certain demeaning situations for Latina/o and Black doctoral students (Santa-Ramirez, 2021), which can force them out of doctoral education (Crumb et al., 2020). One of the key causes for growing dropout rates of Black doctoral candidates, according to Kong et al. (2013), is negative academic interaction experiences. Negative feelings are the predominate affective state among doctoral students of color, leading them to drop out of the program (Sverdlik et al., 2018). In this context, Proctor et al. (2018) argued that institutional policies, such as financial assistance, a pleasant departmental atmosphere, diversified professional networks and mentorship opportunities, and culturally sensitive procedures, are essential for student retention in graduate education.

History of Exclusion and Isolation for Black Women

Black women have long acknowledged that the confluence of “race and gender” puts them in a prime position to be misunderstood (Porter & Byrd, 2021). Others in society just seem to dismiss the complexities of being both Black and female, while holding onto its significance in their life. Stockfelt (2018) referred to them as a "minority of minorities," since they must compete for the same resources and chances as their White and male counterparts in society. As a consequence, Black women in the academy often stand out while being pushed to the side in their drive to simply perform their job (Mukandi & Bond, 2019). Authors have contended, regarding Black women, that in higher education, especially doctoral degree programs, they are typically marginalized and undermined (Dortch & Patel, 2017; Howard-Vital, 1989). They are found at the far end of the academic ladder and face prejudice at each step of their educational journey based on their race and gender (Walkington, 2017). Furthermore, Black women are more

secluded and marginal, have less chances to be supported, experience misperceptions regarding function and identity at their departments, and endure greater personal stress (Corbin et al., 2018). This may be especially challenging in the STEM professions, in which Black women graduates have been reported to drop out, owing to the excess of isolation, marginalization, and specifically, the lack of representative mentorship (McGee & Bentley, 2017).

Individual experiences are interdependent due to the numerous elements of their identity, involving race, gender, class, and sexual orientation (Brewer, 2001). In this regard, society is defined as "Black" meaning Black males and "Women" being White women; however, "Black women are not White women plus color, or Black men plus gender" (Croom & Patton, 2012, p. 22).

Numerous studies conducted at various eras and locations have conclusively proven several discrepancies between both genders as graduate students, including differences among White and Black female graduate students. According to Mickens (2002), Edward Bouchet, who graduated from Yale in 1876, was the first AA man to acquire a PhD. In 1877, the first White woman received a PhD (Perkins, 2015). The first AAW to get a doctoral degree was Georgiana Rose Simpson from the University of Chicago more than 40 years later in 1921 (Walker, 2002). The extreme gap between the degree attainment of Black male and female scholars indicates the history of exclusion and isolation in the academic world.

Although research evidence has suggested that Black American females continue to fall to the rear of multiple subgroups of society, especially men and women in other strata, Kaba (2008) referred to AAW as "the new model minority." Despite suffering twofold in their struggle to access the initial education, today, AAW have evolved as one of the successful strata in higher education (Kaba, 2008). Tisdell (1993) conducted a comparative case study in higher education

classes that included race, class, and age. According to the results, nontraditional women are more active, at least in classrooms where emotive types of knowledge are prioritized (Tisdell, 1993). While AAs have demonstrated significant growth in the educational arena, both AA males and AAW still need to deepen their efforts as an attempt to meet Whites and Asians in the battle for higher education (Corbin et al., 2018).

Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences

Substantial evidence has suggested that trauma-related cognitions are crucial for the progress of college students (Moser et al., 2007). ACEs are a wide-reaching issue with severe lifetime costs associated with trauma (Bateson et al., 2020) stemming from numerous sorts of corporal or emotive mistreatment, including additional abuse to children under the age of 18 years (Riedl et al., 2020). Furthermore, early adversity has been linked to an increased risk of developing numerous behavioral behaviors and negative consequences (Colburn et al., 2021). In education, the terms ACE impacts and trauma are often used interchangeably, despite the fact that the concepts of ACE exposure and childhood trauma disorders are separate (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018). According to research, college students are a particularly susceptible section of the community, with confirmation of a high prevalence of ACEs, which pose a threat regarding substance use in ethnic groups (Forster et al., 2018).

Educational institutions are teeming with disadvantaged students determined to challenge the tales associated with them as well as their families (Azmitia et al., 2018). ACEs have harmed a high number of such students, especially the ones considered as nontraditional in regard to age (Richardson et al., 2018). Trauma and ACEs were highlighted as one of the biggest hurdles to academic progress in college students by Morton (2018). These students have developed survival

and perseverance strategies that do not serve them positively in their academic settings (Espino & Zambrana, 2019).

Understanding ACEs and the ways in which trauma impacts the individuals in academic settings is very significant in the field of higher education (Sciaraffa et al., 2018). The Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences research, conducted in the mid-1990s, found three key areas related to premature death of adults, which were identified as: “abuse, neglect, and household problems” (Boullier & Blair, 2018). Later, 10 dimensions of ACEs were identified by Felitti et al. (1998), which included “physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, violent treatment of the mother, household substance abuse, household mental illness, parental separation or divorce, and incarceration of a household member.” Moreover, Lanier and Lombardi (2020) highlighted that various minority students might encounter at least one or more of these ACEs.

A plethora of research has been carried out in order to study the association of ACEs and negative life outcomes in multiple contexts. In a study by Blodgett and Lanigan (2018), a higher ACE incidence was linked to a higher probability of repeating a grade, absenteeism, and decreased school participation. Burke and colleagues (2011) discovered that when ACE exposure rose, so did learning and behavior difficulties in schools (Choi et al., 2019). Furthermore, adversities, both single and co-occurring, have been demonstrated to impair reading ability (Shi et al., 2020). According to research, Black people are more influenced by ACEs than White people, resulting in excessive drinking, race-related distress, and unfavorable health effects (Marks et al., 2021).

Minority students often have a disproportionately larger number of ACEs when they enter higher education (Maguire-Jack et al., 2020). The greater the ACEs score, the less prepared

these students are for the higher education framework. Minority students may confront intolerance, insensitivity, and systematic prejudice inside higher education institutions, leading to a feeling of helplessness and a lack of authentic voice (Richardson et al., 2018).

The traditional ACEs comprise childhood abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction (Giovanelli & Reynolds, 2021), but the expanded ACEs contain new items that also assess bullying, community violence, neighborhood safety, racism, and life in foster care (Lin et al., 2021). Lanier et al. (2018) discovered that the kinds and combinations of ACEs encountered had a significant impact on outcomes. Likewise, Cronholm et al. (2015) reported on the incidence and demographic variance of conventional and expanded ACEs in a more socioeconomically and ethnically diverse group. Their results corroborated the long-held belief that minority and low-income communities face more difficulty (Cronholm et al., 2015). Additionally, prior research revealed that, not only the racial disparities in the number of ACEs experienced, but the kinds of ACEs may also vary based on the race to which the victims belong (Mersky & Janczewski, 2018). Given the personal and social level deprivation, the existence of diversity based on race is substantial in the kind and group of ACEs that children encounter (Maguire-Jack et al., 2020).

The Effect on Mental Health and Well-Being

A vast majority of literature emphasizes on the harmful impact of ACEs on college students' health, education, social, and personal life (Bateson et al., 2020). According to studies, there is a dose-response association among ACEs and negative consequences; the higher the score of ACEs, the probability of developing negative outcomes is increased accordingly, which might range from health-harming behaviors to suffering from poor adult health, and ultimately fall to premature death (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018). The long-term effects of ACEs have also been studied in literature where the authors concentrated on the association of these effects with

psychological disorders (Hughes et al., 2016). Thus, rising levels of ACEs have been linked to increased risks of symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, panic attacks, hallucinations, psychosis, and suicide attempts, as well as general psychopathology, psychotropic drug usage, and treatment for mental disorders (Wade et al., 2016). Literature has also demonstrated that the existence of ACEs has a negative influence on college students' grade point averages (Subotić et al., 2018). Because of the links among ACEs and outcomes, such as low academic achievements and the growth of harming acts related to the health, persons who have experienced ACEs could be subjected to a variety of risks, which include deteriorated mental health and well-being, poor physical health, unemployment, and public denial.

Extending the existing conventional ACEs measure is critical, as the effects of life events on future health are discovered across both genders, racial/ethnic groupings, and socioeconomic strata (Cronholm et al., 2015). ACEs and racial prejudice are especially significant risk factors for psychological well-being problems in students (Dorvil et al., 2020). Unfortunately, psychological well-being problems, such as depressive disorders, disorders, eating disorders, drug usage, sleeplessness, and dropping out, are associated with college students who are exposed to ACEs (Hinojosa et al., 2019). Research has also demonstrated racial discrimination experiences across a wide spectrum of racial/ethnic minority college students, with certain minority populations being more vulnerable to prejudice (Molina et al., 2015). Discrimination may manifest itself in the form of microaggressions from instructors and classmates, as well as unwelcoming or socially uninviting undergraduate campus settings (Wood, 2010). Such racial prejudice may have a detrimental influence on racial/ethnic college students' self-esteem, well-being, and mental health (Forrest-Bank & Cuellar, 2018).

In the United States, racial differences in health outcomes are extensively documented. Several additional studies have also emphasized how prejudice connects with various elements of racial/ethnic minority students' experiences, which may cast a detrimental effect on the educational achievement of students (Vines et al., 2017). Furthermore, owing to racial inequalities in health, AAs demonstrate greater impermanence rates in comparison with the European Americans as the bulk of the top causes of death (Williams & Mohammed, 2009). Despite the fact that prejudice occurs at all levels of government, a growing body of research has committed to comprehending the impact of discrimination in healthcare originating from the economic and social consequences associated with adverse health outcomes (Bailey et al., 2017).

In addition, discrimination has also been linked to comparable despair and nervousness results, as well as a slew of other negative mental health consequences (Cooke et al., 2014). Because AAs are more exposed to ACEs, they tend to experience negative consequences of discrimination in terms of poor health outcomes, leading to the propensity of them indulging in maladaptive coping strategies (Forrest-Bank & Cuellar, 2018).

Black Americans feel greater rage and worse health than White Americans, and Black females have greater probability to experience the suffering originating from depression than White females (Roxburgh & MacArthur, 2014). Assari (2018) investigated whether AAW have greater depression rates as compared to their male counterparts and found that AAW have a greater likelihood of experiencing racial discrimination, ACEs, related biases, and poor consequences than their male counterparts. As a result, the prevalence of ACEs is critical to examine when investigating different populations, especially women, who face numerous types of adversity/oppression based on gender and ethnicity (Barbee, 1992; Leath et al., 2021).

The Doctoral Experience for Black Women

Barriers

Owing to their suffering regarding racism and sexism in their graduate schools, AAW possess a distinct doctoral experience (Gusa, 2010). The intersectionality of being Black as well as female in the doctoral degree program brings challenges that are identified and exacerbated by the first-generation doctoral students (Gardner, 2013). The barriers to their doctoral experience, according to Gildersleeve et al. (2011), include unsuccessful and inadequate counseling and supervisory relations with faculty; scholarly and private nullification; inadequate official assistance; hostility; and isolation. Furthermore, Shavers and Moore (2019) argued that unfavorable college incidents tend to make AAW in graduate courses feel lonely and abandoned. When faced with the rigorous demands of a PhD program, mixed with seclusion, isolation, and inadequate assistance, Black women repeatedly struggle with developing effective means to continue and deal with their graduate degree attainment. As a result, identifying and recognizing the aforesaid obstacles has become critical, since they have the tendency to generate mental and emotive barriers to their doctoral degree completion, as well as severely impact these women's general well-being.

Reinforced Whiteness

Identities are not experienced in isolation; therefore, it requires social environment to connect a person's identity with his/her position at a certain moment (Masta, 2018). Student membership is usually negotiated in numerous groups, since it pertains to their identities inside classrooms and schools; therefore, they have the tendency to behave in different manners while interacting with their native fellows in comparison to their White fellows (Ballakrishnen & Silver, 2019). According to Gusa (2010), PWIs concerned towards resolving AA drop-out rates

owing to unfavorable campus climates should recognize that racism and prejudice are the results of "White mainstream ideology (Whiteness) and White privilege." For generations, Black people have fought to get admission to White colleges (Anderson, 2015). According to research, Black graduate students often face challenges to retention and completion rates at PWIs, owing mostly to White privilege and its accompanying negative statements (Reddick & Pritchett, 2015).

Universities suppress AA people in academia, be it students or faculty members, meanwhile strengthening their White counterparts via core curriculum and selected discourse and consequently, supporting as well as reinforcing the White culture (Sanders, 2016).

Exclusion is considered as one of the most successful strategies to suppress AA individuals because of the existence of few means to demonstrate the significance of AA knowledge pertaining to the absence of AA students, staff, or writers (Fordham, 1993). Black individuals who are excluded from PWIs face subordination, which is common at colleges and universities (Harper, 2013). The ones who do overcome the hurdles established to keep them out of PWIs confront many types of silence as a result of the way they are taught at these institutions (Grant & Simmons, 2008). The school system that many Black students are put in is not geared for their success (McGee & Bentley, 2017). This is due to pedagogy that is incompatible with these students' cultural backgrounds, leading to the White enforcement, in addition to the denigration and suppression faced by AA students in terms of knowledge, culture, and experience (Camarota & Romero, 2006). It is not just the pedagogical approach that inhibits Black students' academic progress, though, but also racial prejudices inside the curriculum and texts (Sanders, 2016). AA students consistently encounter a pedagogy that significantly serves to Whiteness, while being excluded by regular education and ethnically unfair texts (Rios & Longoria, 2021). Consequently, the achievement of AA students is heavily dependent upon their

desire to integrate within the authoritarian White institutional environment, as well as their understanding of the structure of their educational institution, which is aimed to sustain the current situation of White reign (Harper, 2013).

Adequate Staff Representation

Academic institutes regularly profess to value diversity and believe in the necessity of hiring racially diverse faculty; nonetheless, this variety is rarely represented in fair magnitudes, especially in the academy's most distinguished posts (Ainscow, 2020). The differential in Black doctoral students has an influence on the Black faculty gap (Espino & Zambrana, 2019). The vast majority of full-time professors in the United States identify as White, with roughly 20% identifying as minority, comprising people of various ethnic origins (Kelly et al., 2017). When underrepresented faculty members are employed with such titles, they are put at a disadvantage since they must prove themselves, and they often doubt their position in the academy (Stanley, 2006). This lack of faculty representation deters potential PhD students (Croom & Patton, 2011), since Black teachers enhance academic preparation and success for all students, but especially AA students (Jackson et al., 2021). The presence of AA instructors in academic institutes is critical to AA students' academic achievement (Lancaster & Xu, 2017). This success may be linked to improved mentoring relationships that are seen to be more student-centered in comparison with mentoring from dissimilar race (Wood, 2008). The area of medicine, (Deville, Jr et al., 2020) has indicated that, despite a rising accessible pipeline in the U.S. medical profession, Black doctors remain disproportionately underrepresented. Likewise, Ireland et al. (2018) argued that in STEM education, the success of Black students is related to their faculty representation. According to Shavers et al. (2019), unfavorable academic events usually make

AAW in PhD programs feel lonely and isolated; lacking substantial assistance from professors exacerbates these emotions.

Patton (2009) emphasized the necessity of having same-gender teachers, specifically for women with whom they might connect, mentioning that women in the doctoral process usually feel neglected, unnoticed, and rejected by the administration and faculty. Black women often do research that sheds light on social concerns in their communities, which aids them to connect and understand to the expressions of their fellow AAW (Brown et al., 2017). According to Jean-Marie and Brooks (2011), faculty of color assesses, conflicts with, and criticizes established traditions, while instantaneously formulating and creating new ones. This may be accomplished successfully via good mentoring by assisting Black women in cultivating professional development abilities and transforming the normative construction of academic settings that express exclusion for Black women (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021).

Socialization and Assistance

Academic performance at all levels, including PhD work, is dependent on effective socialization into academia (Taylor & Antony, 2000). Doctoral programs often need a long period of mature socialization in rational abilities, proper approaches regarding doctoral experience, and domain-specific assessments (Posselt, 2018). An effective socialization process is essential for a prosperous graduate career. Historically, graduate students' socialization has been dominated by the dominant culture, which has been largely White and nearly entirely male until recently (Boykin, 2020). Socialization chances are critical for women pursuing successful professional academic careers. Though all doctorate candidates face problems while going from scholar to researcher, the socialization process in doctoral degrees is more difficult for AAW (Turner & Thompson, 1993). Education has traditionally been seen as a great equalizer by many

Black children and their families, even though the route to mobility has frequently been tough (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020). This includes interaction with classmates and instructors in order to gain visibility as whole human beings, resulting in flexible, visible, and transparent academic accomplishment results (Tuitt, 2010). AAW encounter isolation and exclusion at campuses due to their identity, which involves being a person of color, which leads to limited contact in essential groups, networks, and field-specific mentorship (Patterson & Davis, 2015).

Several elements impact PhD students of color's socialization experiences, including interactions with peers and faculty, faculty advising, support networks, and campus atmosphere (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). Sverdlik et al. (2018) emphasized the significance of assistance for minority doctoral students, indicating that it is the most critical factor, the absence of which severely impairs the completion, accomplishment, and welfare of Black doctoral students. Patton (2009) investigated the mentorship practices important to doctoral AAW, and the findings revealed that Black women who received mentorship assistance both within and outside of the academy performed better academically. Furthermore, campus climate has a crucial position in the PhD experiences of AA students, predominantly women (Jean-Francois, 2019). Scholars have convincingly shown that AA students are more expected to have unfavorable perceptions of campus environment and belongingness than their colleagues of other races (Duran et al., 2020). According to research, AA students regularly feel lack of belongingness and hostile campus environment, which is an outcome of racial hostility, microaggressions, lack of representation, and biased treatment (Mwangi et al., 2018). Moreover, adverse sights, racism, and hostile campus climate have an impact on numerous students' upshots, which include but are not limited to persistence, academic performance, and graduation (Mishra, 2020).

Racial Discrimination

United States culture resides on social hierarchy having Whites as a dominant group and Blacks at the bottom (Marger, 2014). Racial discrimination is defined as a synthesis of race-based superiority ideology, also known as racism, where the social constructions and interactive behaviors are associated with domination and subjugation (Pieterse & Powell, 2016). The said injustice drives underprivileged students to struggle with mental health difficulties (Kirkinis et al., 2021). All PhD students encounter severe institutional demands, in addition to time and energy; however, minority students experience additional responsibilities and burdens in their endeavors to finish their doctorate (Hollingsworth et al., 2018).

Racial prejudice manifests itself in a variety of forms and degrees of severity. According to studies, racial prejudice is a key factor of the heightened dropout rate of AA students enrolled at PWIs. Gusa (2010) carried out a study in this regard, the findings of which highlighted that 75% of AA students experience at least one discriminatory behavior due to their race connected with doubting their academic capacity over a year's period. According to Miles et al., (2020), Black students endure frequent racial microaggressions and stereotypical comments about their academic abilities, which may jeopardize their psychological well-being and educational success in engineering doctoral degree programs. Furthermore, Ong et al. (2018) conducted research on AAW in higher education at different levels and discovered that 70% of them encountered no less than one kind of microaggression within their degree experience. Torres et al. (2010) identified three types of racial microaggression encounters among AA students at graduate colleges: criminalization, underestimating, and racial isolation. Most of it is due to the preconceptions that portray that AA students and their racial association as a misfit and incongruent to the campus climate (McGee et al., 2019).

Facilitators to Persistence/Completion

Numerous studies have defined academic achievement as the capacity to persevere and advance intellectually until the PhD degree is acquired. Extant literature reports multiple factors that contribute to the persistence and completion of doctoral programs by minority students, in comparison to the previously mentioned studies that focus on those factors that halt the doctoral experience of AA students in higher education. According to Acosta et al. (2016), legitimate interactions among students and the faculty, institutional assistance, and socialization aspects are significant facilitators of Black graduate student persistence. According to research, supportive campus settings tend to have a beneficial influence that may favorably affect the experiences and results of AAs (Lancaster & Xu, 2017). Furthermore, Patterson-Stephens et al. (2017) stated that mentorship, social location, faculty advising, and faculty diversity are some of the factors that might be favorably enforced in order to promote the degree completion of Black graduate female students.

Strayhorn (2014) contended that reduced feelings of marginalization and isolation while negating the consequences of a hostile campus atmosphere can enhance a sense of belonging. Likewise, Freeman et al. (2007) explored the sense of belongingness in a standard higher education context, where they discovered a substantial association of sense of belonging with academic self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and judgements regarding their academic work. Furthermore, increased belongingness to department and campus has been shown to be a significant facilitator of disadvantaged students' degree completion (Kay et al., 2011)

For most Black women, navigating graduate school in quest of an advanced degree is a difficult task. Lord et al. (2009) conducted research to analyze the persistence of minority students in the engineering profession, concluding that Black females had greater persistence

rates than male students of their race, due to large support networks as a primary facilitator for them. The present section focuses on the positive effects of mentorship, diverse faculty, and resilience as enabling factors for Black female students' perseverance and completion of PhD degrees.

Effective Mentoring

Higher education is largely based on informal mentoring by professors and staff personnel (Carmel & Paul, 2015). Literature has emphasized the student outcomes of mentoring in terms of commitment, satisfaction, research publications, and grants with the notion that mentoring relationships of faculty members with their students favor the generation of positive outcomes (Alcocer & Martinez, 2018). According to research, guiding AA students through their educational experiences creates the circumstances for successful graduate degree completion. Mentors show genuine care for the well-being of minorities, exhibit cultural awareness, and value the protégé's distinct personality (Knouse, 2013). Mentoring partners' dedication and participation are critical for creating, sustaining, and experiencing effective mentoring (Butz et al., 2019). Mentors use comparable experiences to comprehend mentees' concerns in order to establish empathy with them (Carmel & Paul, 2015).

Although literature demonstrates the restricted opportunities for AAW to be mentored, they possess greater tendency to become mentors, especially for AA students and faculty (Griffin & Reddick, 2011). Similarly, Rasheem et al. (2018) discovered that Black women preferred to be mentored by other Black women. Patterson and Davis (2015) highlighted the need of a network of mentors specifically customized according to the needs of AA doctoral students, which would assist them in their career development, understanding the “rules of the game,” and transforming towards the structures of White dominant academic culture. While the data supports that “same-

race, same-gender” mentoring is helpful, for AAW, the scarcity of female Black professors at PWIs limits the number of mentoring matches (Cartwright et al., 2021).

Ethnically Diverse Faculty

Faculty and administration involving individuals who are ethnically diverse strengthens higher education and adds to students' ability to live in a global and interconnected world (Thomas, 2018). Since AA academics consistently lack adequate representation, particularly at PWIs, inclusion and a feeling of belonging are seen as top priorities in this respect. Furthermore, racial microaggressions encountered by AAs in higher education are often maintained by White academics who are oblivious to the discriminatory roots or consequences of their racist acts (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020).

Students in general, and AA students in particular, benefit from the academic preparedness and achievement of Black instructors (Jackson et al., 2021). The existence of AA instructors on college campuses is critical to AA students' academic achievement (Lancaster & Xu, 2017). Beyond diversifying the racial and ethnic make-up of postsecondary faculty and increasing the number of role models for AA students, Madyun et al. (2013) argued that the provision of classroom experiences by AA faculty is crucial for the growth of students' intercultural competency. Furthermore, Patton (2009) emphasized the necessity of same-gender teachers with whom women might connect, noting the neglect encountered by the female graduate students, in addition to being nonexistent and rejected by the faculty. According to Jean-Marie and Brooks (2011), faculty of color assesses, conflicts with, and criticizes established traditions, whilst concurrently expressing and instituting new ones. This may be accomplished successfully via strong mentoring by assisting Black women in developing professional development abilities and transforming the normative construction of academic settings that

express exclusion for Black women (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021). As a result, students will have a broad representation of Black instructors who can give assistance and advice to students of color in an effective manner.

Resilience

An expanding all-inclusive literature demonstrates substantial links between ACEs and their effects on health over the lifetime (Bateson et al., 2020). However, a rising body of work has shed light on the idea of resilience, in which ACEs do not result in unfavorable health outcomes (Woods-Jaeger et al., 2018). The transition of toxic stress into bearable stress is the foundation of resilience, which is a supportive response to the hardship (Shonkoff et al., 2021). Inner inclinations and societal encounters blend vigorously to generate resilience (Kalisch et al., 2019).

Visualizing how protective experiences and adaptive skills counteract major adversity and yield positive results is one method to understand the development of resilience (Saldanha & Barclay, 2021). Multiple lines of study have discovered different variables that influence children to favorable results regardless of hardship (Kuenzel et al., 2021). These include "strengths derived from the student, the family, peer and adult interactions, and the larger social contexts that form and promote solid brain architecture" (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015, p. 5). Furthermore, having the stated constructive forces in place leads to multiple positive outcomes, specifically maximizing resilience (King, 2020). When these positive variables are missing, disturbed, or weakened, there is nothing to offset the negative consequences of considerable adversity, establishing the circumstances for poor outcomes and limited life chances (Masten & Reed, 2002). Bellis et al. (2017) argued that developing resilience

in children, as well as reducing childhood adversity, are critical if low mental well-being is to be improved.

The term "resilience" is used repeatedly in research focusing on AA students (Leyva, 2021). McGee and Bentley (2017) identified "high academic self-esteem, school and home support systems, the development of perseverance and optimism, and knowledge of a collective struggle against race-, gender-, and class-related obstacles" as facilitators of Black students' educational resilience. Existing research has shed light on how certain disadvantaged AA students demonstrate resistance and resilience and manage with race-based labels and other kinds of prejudice while retaining high performance (Kelly et al., 2017). Doctoral students cited positive relationships and knowledge of how to thrive inside the university system as beneficial elements that helped them graduate (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Experiences of resilience by AA females in negotiating oppression specifically include coping techniques and institutional supports (Williams et al., 2020). Shavers and Moore (2014) investigated the experiences of female AA doctoral students, where they observed that good faculty mentorship was the most prevalent predictor of doctoral students finishing their degrees on time. Institutional supports, such as mentorship from faculty members who were typically Black women, study groups with Black peers, and racial and gender affinity spaces, also contributed to resilience of AAW notwithstanding isolation (Leyva, 2021).

Summary

AA students encounter unique challenges as they try to navigate contexts in which they are even more of a minority and are exposed to the racism and oppression that often accompany higher education settings. The literature has shown that Black students have much lower persistence and graduation rates. Furthermore, as the "minority of minorities," Black women

have long recognized that the intersection of race and gender places them in an especially vulnerable position to misinterpretation. When confronted with the demanding expectations of a doctoral program, along with isolation, alienation, and insufficient support, Black women often struggle to find effective ways to maintain and cope with their graduate degree pursuits. As a consequence, identifying and recognizing the aforementioned difficulties has become crucial, as they have the potential to create mental and emotional barriers to completing their PhD degrees, as well as having a negative influence on these women's overall well-being. Although an abundance of research concentrates on the reasons that impede the doctoral experience of AA students in higher education, existing literature has provided many aspects that contribute to minority students' perseverance and completion of doctoral programs. Meaningful connections between students and professors, institutional support, and socialization characteristics are all important facilitators of Black female graduate students' resolve in this respect.

Chapter Three: Methods

Overview

The current research explored the perceptions of African American women (AAW) with at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE) graduating with a doctoral degree from a predominantly White institution (PWI). Personal interviews were part of an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) that analyzed AAW's descriptions of their lived experiences and uncovered an underlying structure (Smith & Dunworth, 2003). This chapter comprises the particulars of the research approach for this investigation. First, the study design is presented with justification for the study. Then, the research questions are presented, and the setting and study participants are described. The researcher's role is presented, followed by the data collection process and the analysis of the findings. The data analysis approach of the IPA is described with its rationale. The trustworthiness of the research in terms of its credibility, dependability, and transferability is reviewed to assure the replication of methodologies in future investigations. Ethical considerations are given next. The chapter ends with a summary.

Design

The current study was qualitative, where the phenomenological research design was utilized to address the research questions. Qualitative research typically examines interpretations and perspectives in a specific scenario (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). It is regarded as a productive model of what happens in a natural context and allows the researcher to establish a degree of depth via active participation in real events (Neubauer et al., 2019). Qualitative research aims to convey the participants' viewpoints as the focus of the study. It employs emergent design, which integrates data analysis, preliminary data evaluation, and data collecting in an iterative process. Rather than weakening the integrity and reliability of the qualitative

investigation, the versatility of this evolving design may improve and enrich it (Mohajan, 2018).

In phenomenology, a person's experience of the meaning of an event as it occurs outside of the individual is explored. In IPA, the researcher is "especially interested in what happens when the everyday flow of lived experience takes on a particular significance for people" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 1). IPA allows the researcher to investigate how others make meaning of significant life experiences (Smith et al., 2022, p. 1). To better understand people's perspectives, viewpoints, and knowledge of a certain situation, phenomenological approaches are used to comprehend people's perspectives, viewpoints, and knowledge of a particular condition. IPA also employs a double hermeneutic, meaning that "the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 3).

With this qualitative, phenomenological study, the researcher learned more about how to gain insight into the perspectives of AAW. Currently, available research did not provide any insight into this topic. As a result, the study participants shed light on this phenomenon. This qualitative, phenomenological research approach included in-depth, semi-structured interviews that gathered information about the participants. The phenomenological method tries to achieve insight and knowledge anchored in experiences in a particular setting (Byrne, 2001).

Phenomenology is a kind of qualitative inquiry that examines an individual's lived experiences in the world (Fuster, 2019). The purpose of phenomenology is to characterize the significance of an experience, both in terms of what happened and how it happened (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). The phenomenological technique explores a person's understanding of the research question by listening and analyzing their perceptions (Neubauer et al., 2019). This approach results in a comprehensive grasp of the numerous difficulties of the participants.

Research that exclusively focuses on quantifiable characteristics of human behavior is not likely to provide useful information or revelations about the subjective component of experience, which is very important. As a result, the qualitative approach is the most practical form of analysis for this study.

The specific kind of phenomenology used in this study is hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology is centered on the lived perception of people and organizations (Fuster, 2019). It is an effort to disclose the world experienced by the individual via their lived stories. This school of thought holds that interpretations are all people have, and that description is an interpretive process in and of itself (Mohajan, 2018). This method focuses on describing and interpreting the underlying patterns of lived experience and recognizing the significance and worth of that personal observation (Neubauer et al., 2019). Such a study may provide a deeper comprehension of African American (AA) female graduate students who have had an ACE. The effectiveness in their experience iteration is contingent on increased awareness of the potential usefulness of their experiences and increased familiarity. This might lead to a sound and loud understanding of the participants of this study.

Interpretation is involved in quantitative studies in the sense that researchers set the horizon of expectations for the study by preselecting the variables that will be studied and in the sense that they draw conclusions from the results of statistical tests, which are themselves based on a set of assumptions. The interpretation that does not go beyond these predetermined boundaries includes operational definitions of concepts and their representations as items in surveys and other measurements, among other restrictions. The use of quantitative description restricts the amount of information that can be gleaned regarding the meaning that participants place on occurrences. Furthermore, researchers leave less space for the unexpected when they

use quantitative descriptions (Becker, 1996; Becker & Howard, 2014; Sandelowski & Margarete, 2000a). Thus, in this study, quantitative research was not appropriate.

Research Questions

There were two research questions that were addressed in the current study:

RQ1: How do African American females with at least one adverse childhood experience describe the meaning of graduating with a doctoral degree from a predominantly White institution?

RQ2: How do African American females with at least one adverse childhood experience describe the process they went through to overcome barriers to graduate with a doctoral degree from a predominantly White institution?

Setting

The research was conducted at a PWI, the University of Missouri-Columbia, in the midwestern part of the United States. This university offers degree programs from bachelor's to doctoral degrees. The University of Missouri-Columbia was selected because the institution is predominantly White and has enough AA female graduate students to participate in the study. The university is in an urban setting in Columbia, Missouri. The enrolled student population at the University of Missouri-Columbia, both undergraduate and graduate, is 75.4% White, 6.72% Black or AA, 4.52% Hispanic or Latino, 3.75% two or more races, 2.52% Asian, 0.22% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.0733% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders. Students enrolled in full-time graduate programs are most commonly White females (39.5%), followed by White males (25.5%), and Black or AA females (2.96%). The majority of the teaching faculty is composed of Caucasian people.

Participants

After approval of the methods section, the research questions developed in this chapter were reviewed by experts in the field to ensure the validity of the study. Moreover, the researcher sought approval for this study from the institutional review board (IRB). After IRB approval (see Appendix A), a pilot interview was conducted with a sample of participants to ensure the face validity regarding clarity of language and structure. Then, the process of data collection was started. All the participants were given a complete overview of this study and its purpose.

The current section addresses the sampling details in order to identify the participants of the study. The sample pool for this study comprised of AA female graduate students at a PWI with at least one ACE. Haven and Van Grootel (2019) contended that in qualitative research, the researcher has complete flexibility to engage in a continuous data-gathering and analysis procedure. The number of participants in the sample is not defined in advance, and the researcher may choose more individuals through snowball sampling if saturation has not yet been achieved. Boddy (2016) recommended a sample size of 10 participants for qualitative studies, involving a homogenous sample. Thus, the anticipated sample size for this study was 10 participants.

The sampling procedure was purposive. Purposive sampling is a method of selecting a sample with a specific goal to access persons, times, and places typical of provided criteria (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Purposive sampling is one of many non-probability sampling methods (Lund Research Ltd, 2012). The selection of participants is important since individuals are continually being relied upon for expertise and information (Tongcom, 2007). Purposeful sampling is best useful for investigating a specific cultural subject with qualified specialists inside that area (Tongcom). The selection of the purposive sample is critical to the quality of the data collected; as a result, the participant's credibility and competency must be assured (Not

found in reference list.).

Purposive sampling, according to Maxwell (2005), is a sampling approach in which certain places, events, people, and processes are purposefully picked for the information they may supply that is not readily available from other sources. Units from a prespecified group are sought out and sampled purposefully (Lund Research Ltd, 2012). The primary purpose of purposive sampling is to narrow the characteristics of a population to allow the researcher to best address the research issue at hand. The authors stated that purposive sampling techniques are primarily used in qualitative studies and can be defined as selecting units (e.g., institutions, groups of individuals, and individuals) based on specific purposes of answering research study questions.

However, in order to derive the required sample, the inclusion criteria was used, which included: 1) female, 2) doctoral graduate, 3) AA, 4) from a PWI and 5) having self-identified with having at least one ACE. Any potential participant who did not fall under all five of these parameters was not included in the study to ensure the sample's appropriateness and effectiveness.

Snowball sampling was also used to obtain the desired pool of participants. This enabled the researcher to reach the appropriate potential participants effectively. Snowball sampling is a nonprobability sampling approach in which current research participants recruit prospective study participants from their social circles (Leighton et al., 2021). It enables research to be conducted where it would otherwise be difficult due to a shortage of subjects (Berndt, 2020). Snowball sampling may enable the researcher to find traits of a population that are not commonly known to the public or for sensitive issues like adverse experiences (Parker et al., 2019).

The Researcher's Role

Neubauer et al. (2019) contended that in hermeneutic phenomenology qualitative research, the researcher reflects on key themes from participants' experiences with the phenomena while also reflecting on one's own experiences. Considering the association of the researcher with the target participants of this study based on being an AA female graduate student at the University of Missouri-Columbia, the researcher also reflected upon her experiences. This made the participants comfortable addressing such sensitive topics of adverse experiences. Since the researcher was also an AA female graduate student at a PWI, the relevance of experiences were relatively greater, adding to the understanding of the responses. On the negative side of this role, the study could have been subject to the researcher's bias considering her relevance to the participants, which could have affected the data collection and results of data analysis. Such biases were eliminated through the use of bracketing to ensure the study's trustworthiness.

Data Collection

An email was sent to: 1) introduce the study objectives, questionnaire, and interview process; 2) discuss the anticipated time commitment to this study; 3) outline the voluntary nature of participation in the study; and 4) inform the participants that all information gathered will be kept confidential (see Appendix A). Interested participants were requested to answer within 5 days of receiving the invitation. The target sample chosen was based on the first to respond, who was then interviewed after the selection process. Participants in the targeted sample were made aware that their participation in the research was completely voluntary, and they would have the option to withdraw their consent at any time. Participants were allowed to communicate any questions or concerns they may have had about the study via a channel provided by the

researcher. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent statement before participating in the study (see Appendix B).

According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), research transparency is the reader's capacity to view the data collection and analysis procedures. The interview consisted of open-ended questions that assessed participants' agreement with issues about the phenomena. Participants were also asked whether they agree to the audio recording of their interviews, which was transcribed and given to the participants. Triangulation and member checking was used to confirm the veracity of the data collected.

According to Vogt et al. (2012), choosing an acceptable place for interviewing participants is critical. Vogt et al. claimed that there is no one right setting for an interview, but that the atmosphere must be conducive to participants feeling comfortable enough to answer the interview questions honestly and completely. Researchers might use a more formal interview setting. According to Vogt et al. (2012), this is done to ensure consistency and eliminate the use of site features as a variable. The convenience and comfort of the participants was taken into consideration while scheduling and locating interviews. Site approval was given before the study began (see Appendix C).

Participants in the study were allowed to adjust, add to, or clarify the interviews before they were conducted. Participants were checked for accuracy by the researcher, and the transcribed data was reviewed with each participant. The semi-structured interviews were conducted as the last phase in the process. Participation was based on a first-come, first-served basis until the researcher had attracted 10 people to participate. Audio recordings and transcriptions of each interview were made using ZOOM. The data was duly recorded and then transcribed by ZOOM or another transcription program. Once the data collection was done, the

transcriptions of the responses were shared with the participants for feedback purposes. The researcher ensured that the recorded material aligned with what the participants had to say and matched the context of their iterations. The participants were free to omit something that they were uncomfortable with sharing. All the procedures in this study were ensured to comply with the ethical principles of qualitative research. Following the completion of the member checking, the researcher began the process of theme coding and analysis. Participants were not identified by name but were instead given alphanumerical codes.

Interviews

The selected strategy for data collection, as per the research design, was semi-structured interviews. An interview is an organized discussion in which one person asks questions and the other responds. Furthermore, the term, interview, is often used to describe a one-on-one dialogue between an interviewer and an interviewee (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). Conversational interviewing is a method through which research interviewers produce verbal data by conversing with research participants in a casual and conversational manner on certain themes (Boje & Rosile, 2020). In contrast to structured survey interviewing, conversational interviewing allows interviewers to disclose unscripted material to respondents to explain subject interpretation. An in-depth interview with open-ended questions is a strategy for gathering thorough information based on exploration (Mohajan, 2018). In-depth interviews are a qualitative research approach that aims to delve into a respondent's thoughts, emotions, and viewpoints (Rutakumwa et al., 2020).

Semi-structured interviews are considered most appropriate for collecting the most relevant data, considering the purpose of the study and the role of the researcher in this particular research. Semi-structured interviews allow them to address the research questions flexibly,

leading to rich storytelling and supplemented responses for interpretations. The interviews were conducted to address the experiences of the participants. The interviews covered the topics regarding the meaning of graduating with a doctoral degree, along with the barriers and facilitators faced by the participants (see Appendix D for the full survey).

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a term used to describe the process of analyzing a piece of writing. IPA was utilized for data analysis in the current study. IPA is a well-established qualitative approach of investigation that focuses on the deep study of human lived experience on its conditions and emphasizes participants' meaning formation (Miller et al., 2018). Furthermore, IPA is an effort to understand how participants perceive and make sense of their surroundings. Even though there is no single correct approach to conducting data analysis within the IPA framework, all such studies have almost the same data analysis emphasis, which is to pay close attention to trends in respondents' life experiences, the way they create a sense of those personal experiences, and how those experiences are interpreted within social and conceptual contexts (Nizza et al., 2021). For such stories to sound right interpretively, the researcher acts as the story's interpreter who needs a real and richer comprehension of the participants' experiences. An IPA is a flexible and approachable method of phenomenological research that aims to provide a comprehensive and in-depth account that prioritizes the person (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). It allows researchers to reach out to people, listen to their stories, and comprehend their experiences, which sufficiently aids in addressing the particular research questions as per the prescribed methodology (Miller et al., 2018).

Convergence and divergence are also examined in IPA investigations, revealing how participants' perceptions of an event are similar or distinct (Nizza et al., 2021). In IPA, there are

two levels or stages of analysis (Miller et al., 2018). The goal of the first phase of IPA analysis is referred to as first-order analysis. This builds a thorough description of occurrences through participants' perspectives. Researchers use second-order analysis to go further than simple narration and into interpretations, looking at the meaning people assign to different components of their experiences. Researchers want to look at the original description through a broader lens, considering sociological, cultural, and theoretical frameworks.

Transcriptions of interviews were examined and archived using the qualitative software, Nvivo. NVivo offers state-of-the-art services for qualitative data analysis, specifically interviews, and results in various graphic and theoretical interpretations of the research phenomenon (Alam, 2020). Data acquired from interviews was coded and transcribed. The results were analyzed for meaning using qualitative analysis. Similarly, data analysis was investigated to find emergent categories and themes using quantitative analysis. According to Creswell (2007), theme analysis is a description followed by an investigation into various themes, with material grouped together into large clusters of concepts and supporting information provided to support the themes.

The data from the interviews was organized into categories of information by the data analysis program. These categories were referred to as themes and subthemes. According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological data analysis processes of interviews are guided by bracketing, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variations, and a cluster of meaning or essence, among other techniques. The researcher used bracketing and memoing to avoid data recording and collection biases. In addition, these tactics were used to assist in the interpretative phase of second-order analysis. Bracketing is a qualitative research approach for reducing the negative impacts of assumptions that may contaminate the research process (Dörfler & Stierand,

2020). Memoing is the act of capturing introspective notations about the researcher gaining knowledge from the data (McGrath, 2021).

Trustworthiness

The degree of reliance on data, interpretation, and the procedures employed to assure the quality of research is referred to as the study's trustworthiness or rigor (Stahl & King, 2020). The trustworthiness of the current study was assured in terms of its credibility, dependability and confirmability, and the transferability of research methods.

Credibility

Credibility is the degree to which the results of the study correctly depict reality. It refers to the beliefs of a qualitative researcher in the accuracy of the results of the study. The depth of collected data and the researchers' analytical ability determine the research's credibility (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). In order to ensure the credibility of research data and its interpretations, the researcher utilized the bracketing method during data collection. In addition, the feedback method was used, and the participants were involved in the research process to verify the interpretations of their iterations.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability in qualitative research are related to reliability and consistency, handled by extensive information about the context of the study and its environment. Dependability refers to how other researchers can replicate the study and get consistent results (Ramsook, 2018). In this regard, adequate information is being provided in ways in which other researchers can arrive at similar results. In order to guarantee dependability, an inquiry audit was conducted by the researcher of this study.

Confirmability is the degree of neutrality in the research study's conclusion. It is ensured when the study results are consistent with the iterations of the participants, successfully eliminating the researcher's bias or personal intentions (Al-Raisi et al., 2020). In addition, memoing during the data collection process was utilized to express the justifications of interpretations in the data analysis process, making sure the reasons for certain judgments were free from the researcher's bias and purely based on the iterated evidence.

Transferability

Another element of trustworthiness of qualitative research is transferability. Transferability refers to the likelihood that the findings of one study in a certain setting can be used for a similar one. It is defined as a way in which the researcher demonstrates the results of the study that could be applied to comparable contexts, individuals, groups, or phenomena (Stahl & King, 2020). The researcher ensured the study's transferability by demonstrating and documenting that the results of this study could be applied to similar locations, contexts, or participants. However, it should be noted that the said stance cannot be guaranteed based on the subjective nature of the research and humans.

Ethical Considerations

Every research study is subject to certain ethical considerations based on its objective, context, and participants (Ajuwon, 2020). The current study was ensured to align with the ethical principles of academic research. First, the study was approved from the IRB committee before the commencement of the study. In addition, various ethical considerations were taken care of during the design and planning of this study. Participants' privacy was carefully considered by using alphanumeric codes in the methods section. All the participants were treated with respect, and their confidentiality and anonymity were suitably ensured. During the recruitment of

participants, the purpose of the study and other relevant details of data collection, such as interview venue, procedure, and time duration, was communicated in advance. Moreover, informed consent to participate in this study was confirmed by signing a participation form (see Appendix B).

All the information was gathered, and the codes were kept secure with a password in a secure file cabinet that was only accessible to the researcher. The data was saved on a flash drive and will be destroyed 3 years after completion of the study. In order to safeguard the participants' identities, alphanumeric codes were used to code their responses.

All the participants had the autonomy to participate and iterate their experiences and the freedom to withdraw from this study at any point in time. In addition, they were offered the chance to read the transcribed data and provide their feedback, amend responses, and/or omit any information. This was done to ensure their voluntary participation and their freedom of expression. Before recording responses, permission was also obtained from the participants for recording and using their personal information for research purposes. Moreover, no derogatory or insensitive remarks or words were used in order to prevent making the participants uncomfortable or interrupt the research process. All the participants were thanked for their substantial participation and their expression of experiences regarding a sensitive topic.

Summary

This chapter tackled the methodology of the current research, which was designed to explain the experiences of AA females with at least one ACE and analyze the meaning of graduating with a doctorate from a PWI. The study was carried out in qualitative methods using hermeneutic phenomenology, considering its capacity to express the real-life experiences of participants and the researcher's role in complementing the findings through personal

experiences. The study was conducted at the University of Missouri-Columbia, considering its applicability to the research situation. The anticipated sample size was 10, which was meant to be a purposive one. The researcher used the snowball sampling approach to reach out to respondents, as needed. The data was gathered via in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The acquired data was analyzed using IPA. Trustworthiness was assured by the credibility of the data, dependability and confirmability, and most crucially, transferability of the upshots of the study. All the necessary ethical issues were adequately taken care of throughout the research preparation, data collection, analysis, and presentation of the results.

Chapter Four: Findings

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to give voice to the distinctive experiences of Black women seeking doctoral degrees at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) to better understand the interplay of barriers and facilitating mechanisms associated with degree persistence and attainment. The research was also interested in exploring the role of trauma within these experiences to uncover the specifics of how Black women's experiences with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) may positively manifest in academic environments. Data was gathered utilizing semi-structured, one-on-one, in-depth interviews with eight participants. This chapter presents the results of the study. First, the chapter begins with the participants' demographics; next, the themes developed; then, the research questions; and finally, the chapter summary.

Data Analysis Process

The researcher utilized Smith et al.'s (2022) IPA as the research methodology for this study. IPA provided a method for collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting the findings related to the lived experiences of African American (AA) female doctoral graduates. With IPA methodology, it is important to focus on the participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences. IPA involves the investigator engaging in an interpretative relationship with the transcript.

Smith et al. (2022) designed a structure for analysis that includes several stages, which the researcher followed. The first stage encompassed reading and rereading the interview text and listening to all the data. Then, the researcher made initial notes of areas of interest. During this stage, notetaking included the recording of critical phrases and descriptive and conceptual

comments (Smith et al., 2022). The next stage involved working directly with the notes and comments to identify and develop a preliminary list of categories, themes, and patterns, and comparing them across participants (Roberts, 2010).

It should be noted that this process is not prescriptive, and there are many ways of working with the data (Smith et al., 2022). However, at the end of this stage, emergent themes were constructed, and the analyzed data was traced through the process from the initial transcripts to the final structure of themes (Smith et al., 2022). The next step was coding the data. This involved the process of organizing data into small chunks before any meaning was made of those chunks.

Next, the researcher used a descriptive coding process to generate more broad themes based on the identified codes considered relevant to the study. According to Saldaña (2015), descriptive coding provides the reader with what the researcher saw and heard. Descriptive coding offered a clear set of categories for the researcher to determine the secondary coding, in this case, theming the data (Saldaña, 2015). The themes were developed into the primary basis of description in the findings. The next step in the data analysis process involved the presentation of the themes. The researcher used a qualitative narrative to present a detailed discussion of several themes. Finally, the data was interpreted for meaning (Creswell, 2013).

Participants

Eight Black women who overcame their ACEs described their process to obtain a doctoral degree from a PWI. These women held their doctoral degrees for as short as 1 year and as long as 15 years. Table 1 highlights the year the participants graduated, the length of time to complete their degree, and their areas of studies. Pseudonyms were utilized to protect the identity of the participants.

Table 1*Participants*

Participant*	Year Completed	Years to Complete	Area of Study	Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
Judy PhD	2007	3.5 years	Rural Sociology	Mother's Drug Use
Shyy PhD	2014	3 years	Public Health	Parent's Divorce
Jane PhD	2018	4 years	School Psychology	Abandonment by Mother
Brenda PhD	2018	7 years	School Psychology	Racial Discrimination
Mary EdD	2020	3.5 years	Pastoral Counseling	Abandonment by Mother
Esther PhD	2020	9 years	Rural Sociology	Sexual Assault
Skyy PhD	2021	3 years	Social Work	Domestic Violence
Taylor PhD	2021	3 years	Educational Leadership	Mother's Verbal Abuse/ Father's Emotional Absence

Note. *Participants were given pseudonyms for privacy.

Judy

Judy was between the ages of 45–54 years old and was single with no children while working on her doctoral degree. After 3.5 years on her doctoral journey, Judy completed her PhD in Rural Sociology in 2007. When asked to describe her hooding experience, Jane shed tears and with her voice trembling, shared, “15 years later, I still remember that stoop when my advisor placed the hood over my head. I was so grateful.”

Shyy

Shyy was between the ages of 35–44 years old and was single with no children while working on her doctoral degree. After 3 years on her doctoral journey, Shyy completed her PhD in Public Health in 2014. When asked to share supports she received during her journey, Shyy shared, “My advisor who was a White woman was my biggest supporter, she was definitely an outlier.”

Jane

Jane was between the ages of 25–34 years old and was married and pregnant while working on her doctoral degree. After 4 years on her doctoral journey, Jane completed her PhD in School Psychology in 2018. When asked about supports received during her journey, Jane shared, “Of course my husband. I don’t know how I would have made it without his support.”

Brenda

Brenda was between the ages of 25–34 years old, and at the time of working on her doctoral degree, she was single with no children. After 7 years on her doctoral journey, Brenda completed her PhD in School Psychology in 2017. When asked what motivated her to finish her degree, Brenda shared, “I reflected on one of my presentations that talked about the number of Blacks that do not complete their doctoral degree and said to myself I don’t want to be a statistic.”

Mary

Mary was between the ages of 35–44 years old and was married with both children and grandchildren while working on her doctoral degree. After 3 years on her doctoral journey, Mary completed her EdD in Pastoral Counseling in 2021. When asked why she pursued a doctoral degree, Mary humbly shared, “It was not my plan but all God’s plan. I trust Him enough to serve His people.”

Esther

Esther was between the ages of 35–44 years old and was single with no children while working on her doctoral degree. After 9 years on her doctoral journey, Esther completed her PhD in Sociology in 2020. When asked what graduating with a doctorate meant to her, Esther replied,

“After all the trauma I experienced in my program with my advisor, I’m still trying to uplift that.”

Skyy

Skyy was between the ages of 35–44 years old and was married with children while working on her doctoral degree. After 5 years on her doctoral journey, Skyy completed her PhD in Social Work in 2021. When asked why she pursued a doctoral degree, Skyy shared, “I wanted a seat at the table in order to uplift the voices of the Latina mothers I was working with in the community.”

Taylor

Taylor was between the ages of 35–44 years old and was married with children while working on her doctoral degree. After 3 years on her doctoral journey, Taylor completed her EdD in Educational Leadership in 2021. When asked to describe her graduation day, Taylor, smiling proudly, stated, “It was a powerful moment for everyone to see a Black female graduate with her doctoral degree.”

Theme Development

Analysis of the data yielded three themes that related to the research questions and the areas of focus within this study. The first research question yielded two themes, altruism and feelings of inadequacy, while the second research question yielded one theme, role of the advisor/committee member(s).

RQ1

How do African American females with at least one adverse childhood experience describe the meaning of graduating with a doctoral degree from a predominantly White institution?

The themes that emerged from this research question were altruism and feelings of inadequacy. Despite their ACEs, educational journey, and obstacles faced, each of the participants described the reasons for obtaining their doctoral degree as selfless.

Group Experiential Theme 1: Altruism

When asked to describe the meaning of graduating with a doctoral degree from a PWI, each of the participants shared how they began their doctoral journey with the end in mind of serving others. Each of these women enthusiastically shared that they obtained a doctorate for various reasons: to pave the way for others, to make changes in policies for underrepresented students, and to be a representative of Black and Brown students, letting them know they can obtain a doctoral degree if they choose to. See Table 2 for a summary of the participants' responses.

Table 2

Theme 1: Altruism

Participants	Personal Experiential Theme
1. Skyy	Be a voice for the Latina Mothers I'm serving in the community. Having a seat at the table to help uplift their voices.
2. Mary	Submissive to God and trusting His plan for my life to serve His people.
3. Jane	Solve problems in special education classrooms. Being able to make changes in policies. Better serve the underserved/overlooked.
4. Judy	Always take someone with you. Help those that are coming after me. PhD is God's not mine. PhD stands for Praise Him Daily.
5. Shyy	I wanted to pursue a career where I'd be able to do research and ultimately develop culturally appropriate health education interventions.
6. Taylor	Representation to the lives I'm trying to impact. Showing these black/brown students they can obtain a doctoral degree if they choose to.
7. Brenda	Influence change and make schools welcoming and equitable for minority students.

When Jane spoke of her reason for pursuing a doctoral degree, she shared, "I had the opportunity to learn more, because I wanted to solve problems that existed in my current setting as a special ed teacher, and I felt it would give me more options to be able to do that."

Brenda shared the same sentiment saying she pursued her doctorate because:

It would give me more opportunities. I wanted schools to be a lot more welcoming and equitable for students like me and be able to help remove some of the barriers that were in place for me as a kid.

Skyy further elaborated her reason for pursuing a doctoral degree:

I went back to get my PhD because I wanted to have a seat at the table. I wanted to be able to help uplift the voices of those I have been working with and lift up their ideas and figure out how to fund it and figure out what policies need to change to make those kinds of things happen.

Taylor excitedly shared:

There weren't any Black women who have their doctorate in the school districts I worked in. I think it is very important for kids that look like me to be able to see me. I had my daughter before going into my journey, I wanted her along with my son to be able to grow up and see, not only that their father has his doctorate, but that their mother has that too and that's something that they can obtain. I wanted the students whose lives I'm trying to impact to be able to see that they can obtain that as well.

Group Experiential Theme 2: Feelings of Inadequacy

This superordinate emerged as a result of the participants view of themselves throughout their doctoral journey. Throughout the data collection process, each of these women spoke of how they questioned their intelligence and ability to be in a doctoral program. See Table 3 for a summary of the participants' responses.

Table 3*Theme 2: Feelings of Inadequacy*

Participants	Personal Experiential Theme
1. Skyy	Fleeting thoughts if I could get a doctorate. I just didn't have confidence in myself. I'm a lifelong learner of writing.
2. Mary	I was never in the smartest group, but I wasn't in the dumbest group either. I was always in the middle.
3. Jane	Not understanding the doctoral process. Didn't know what I was doing. Lack of confidence in myself.
4. Esther	School had always come easy for me. This was a different beast. No one taught me how to do this doctoral stuff. I didn't know what I was doing.
5. Judy	Feelings of being outta place. I felt like I was behind.
6. Taylor	I didn't ask questions because I didn't want to sound like I didn't know anything. Suffered in silence.
7. Brenda	I started second guessing myself; thinking maybe I'm not a good writer.

Judy shared her experience of feeling inadequate:

I can talk about this because when I first started, I will never forget this. I was sitting in those classes, and I took a theory course, the research course, rural sociology course on the doctorate level course at that time. I can remember my first semester, I felt so outta place and I would go in my advisor's office, and I would tell him I'm behind. I said, I don't know this stuff. Like these people sitting here talking about this, it's like, I, maybe I'm gonna have to read more. You know, I don't know it like that. He said, you're not behind. He said, they're where you are. I said, well, they sure don't sound like it. And I was saying, what have I gotten myself into? And so, I would go in his office saying I'm, I'm not there yet. He said, you just need to keep going through the process.

At this point, Skyy had obtained two master's degrees and still lacked confidence in herself as it pertained to her seeking a doctoral degree. Skyy shared:

I had not ever met a Black woman person with a PhD. And something in me made me think like, dang, I wonder if I could get a PhD? Nah, nah. So, these flighting thoughts

came to mind. After graduating with my master's degree, one of my professors reached out to me trying to usher me into a space to do adjunct work or you know exposure to the Academy. I'm like no, I'm not ready for that. I can't teach nobody nothing. I'm still trying to figure it out. Another professor tried to get me to consider getting my PhD. I still was like, I don't have it. I still just didn't inner wise, like believe that in myself.

Taylor echoed her feelings of inadequacy: "Just feeling like if I asked too many questions or sought help that I would come off as I'm not smart enough, or I don't know what I'm doing. And so, I kind of struggled silently."

RQ2

How do African American females with at least one adverse childhood experience describe the process they went through to overcome barriers to graduate with a doctoral degree from a predominantly White institution?

The sole theme that emerged from this research question was role of advisor/committee members; this theme also had two subthemes: negative experiences and positive experiences.

Group Experiential Theme 3: Role of Advisor/Committee Members

Each participant described the significant impact their relationship with their advisor/committee member(s) had on their doctoral journey. The role of an advisor should be one of support, guidance, and encouragement to the doctoral scholar. Unfortunately, half of the participants did not receive guidance, support, or mentorship from their advisor. Tables 4 and 5 show summaries of the participants' responses by subtheme, respectively.

Table 4*Theme 3: Role of Advisor/Committee Members: Negative Experiences*

Participants	Personal Experiential Theme
1. Skyy	Lack of equity between myself and the white students.
2. Brenda	Horrific experience. All of my interactions with her were significantly negative.
3. Esther	Toxic and abusive. My relationship with my advisor was very traumatic
4. Jane	She wasn't involved at all. No support or guidance.

Subtheme 1: Negative Experiences. Brenda shared she had a “horrific experience” with her advisor. During the interview, when asked about obstacles during her doctoral journey, Brenda shook her head side-to-side and somberly began sharing:

The classes were fine. I finished all my classes early. But the only reason it took me six and a half years to finish was because of my relationship with my advisor, and just not wanting to have to do the dissertation process with her. All of my interactions with her were significantly negative. There was a time where she told me that the way I dress gave off a slutty vibe, and that she was going to have to possibly pull me from my practicums. She offered to purchase me new clothes. She also just wasn't very communicative with me about the dissertation process. It wasn't the same transfer as with a White student in my cohort. She didn't take me as serious as she took the other student.

Esther recalled her experiences with her advisor as being “toxic and abusive.” Esther sat up in the screen and angrily recalled her experiences:

First off, my advisor shut down my research idea because she wanted me to write what she was interested in. She strung me along for over seven years. She abused her power because she knew she was the only one studying social movements on campus. Three different times she flat out refused to sign off on my applications for opportunities for funding and scholarships. During the eighth year of being her advisee and after a mental

breakdown, I finally got someone else to advise me and had to write a whole new dissertation. As long as I was away from her, I didn't care. I finally had my peace.

Jane shared her experience with her advisor as nonexistent:

I'm a new student, like, at least in a doctoral program, I had never done that before I did master's program fine it's kind of one of those things was like, Okay, I did bachelors, I did the Masters good did another master, but like, doctoral that's completely different. And so I think, even just after I finish, I, you know, I heard about other people having experiences where they had someone that really kind of helped guide them along the way, their advisor. You know, I've always felt sad for myself, because I feel like I probably would have had a lot better experiences, experience had I had somebody like that. And I, I didn't, I didn't have anybody and part of, part of me internalize that too, because it's just like, Well. It's kind of one of those things where you have to know where to go for that kind of support.

Table 5

Theme 3: Role of Advisor/Committee Members: Positive Experiences

Participants	Personal Experiential Theme
1. Shyy	She was an outlier. I was definitely grateful for her being in my life.
2. Judy	Rex was a blessing and a support.
3. Mary	He validated me and my experiences. He believed in me when I didn't believe in myself.
4. Taylor	Oh my gosh, he was amazing!

Subtheme 2: Positive Experiences. In this theme, a few of the participants discussed how their experiences with their advisors were amazing and a Godsend. Shyy shared with a huge smile on her face and a glistening in her eyes:

Oh, I was fortunate. My advisor, who is a White woman. She was very supportive and was definitely an outlier. She always helped when she could and provided opportunities that I know other students weren't getting. She was definitely a big support. She is the one who hooded me on graduation and that gave me a sense of accomplishment. I was grateful to have her hood me.

Taylor's experience with her advisor was similar to Shyy's experience. Taylor excitedly shared:

Oh my gosh, he was amazing. So he, I met him because he was the data analytical person for my district that I worked in. And then when I started my program, he had retired by that time. So we'd already had a relationship coming from the district. And so he was just, oh, he was so supportive. Dr. P. was his name. I could email him at midnight, and I'd have a response at four in the morning like, so. He was the other person that pushed me and got me through my program successfully.

Judy smiled when she spoke of her relationship with her advisor: "Dr. R. is a blessing and a huge support. And thanking him, you know, mm-hmm, for his guidance and his patience and facilitation and staying on me. Um, I couldn't have made it without him." On a similar note, Mary was ecstatic to shout praises about her relationship with her advisor:

To have this White man say, I'm going to stick with you and help you get through statistics and actually do it was a first for me. He later became my Chair, and I knew it was a gift from God. This man listened to me and when I thought my dissertation topic was one of the dumbest topics in the world. But for him to find value and the importance of it, and to believe that I could do it, even though he saw my struggle. He saw my deficiencies; he knows my story. And to still believe that I can do it, and I will give you

what you need to get it done. That meant everything in the world to me. That White man did that for a Black female.

Research Question Responses

The focus of this study was to explore the lived experiences of AA females and their doctoral journeys at a PWI. This section summarizes how the research questions were addressed by the results of the study.

RQ1

How do African American females with at least one adverse childhood experience describe the meaning of graduating with a doctoral degree from a predominantly White institution?

One of the themes addressing this question was altruism. Each of the women shared selfless reasons for pursuing their doctorate. Obtaining a doctorate for one of the participants was to be a voice for the Latina mothers she was serving in the community. Another participant shared that she obtained her doctorate to be a representative to the Black and Brown students at her school, showing them that they could obtain a doctorate, also, if one day they chose to. The other theme that emerged from this research question was the participants' feelings of inadequacy. Each of the women shared that they experienced feeling inadequate at some point on their doctoral journey. One of the participants shared that she suffered in silence because she did not ask questions for fear of being seen as not as intelligent as her White counterparts.

RQ2

How do African American females with at least one adverse childhood experience describe the process they went through to overcome barriers to graduate with a doctoral degree from a predominantly White institution?

Each participant agreed there were barriers throughout their doctoral journey. The theme that emerged concerning this research question was the role of their advisors/committee member(s), which had two subthemes of negative experiences and positive experiences. The relationship between one of the participants and her advisor was described as toxic and traumatic. On the other end of the spectrum, one of the participants described her relationship with her advisor as a Godsend.

“This is How We Did It”

I conducted this research to better understand the personal stories of Black women who made the choice to pursue doctoral degrees at PWIs. Specifically, I was interested in learning about the challenges they faced on their journeys and how their prior traumatic experiences facilitated or hindered their success. Each of the eight women I had the opportunity to interview shed light on the longstanding challenges associated with institutional access faced by Black women seeking advanced education that are documented in the literature (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017), as well as the identity-laden burdens that society has historically placed on Black women living in America. As a Black woman myself, and primary investigator for this research, I entered this study expecting to learn more about the salience of the challenges I personally faced in my educational pursuits. However, it quickly became apparent that the nature of storytelling is much more powerful than I had imagined. “Through the art of storytelling, we can preserve our heritage, educate future generations, and inspire change,” simply stated by artist Philipp Humm. As a result of listening to the stories of these women and analyzing their shared experiences, I have learned much more about my own identity as a Black woman in higher education and the ways in which this research exemplifies this notion of shared resistance and resilience and, like all of the other women, my ability to press forward in spite of mitigating

circumstances in the interest of a larger goal. Through this inquiry, I have amplified the voices and stories of these Black women, which in many ways, did the same for my own.

The themes present in these women's stories of altruism, feelings of inadequacy, and role of the advisor, draws an overarching conclusion about the experiences of these Black women with prior trauma who have recently pursued their doctoral degrees. Black women have redefined the notion of trauma into something that fuels their sense of purpose and functions as its own motivation toward goal-directed behavior, yet there continues to be the perpetual absence of sufficient guidance and mentorship surrounding the decisions and actions involved in their pursuit of higher education and advanced degrees.

“Not-So Strong, but Strong-Enough”

Despite society's characterizations of Black women as “strong” and “invincible” (Johnson, 2015), the women I interviewed described having opposing experiences during their doctoral careers: they harbored feelings of inadequacy, alienation, and veil-wearing, as they encountered challenges completing their degree programs at PWI (Cokley et al., 2013; Felder, 2010; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Shavers & Moore, 2014). From the microaggressions Brenda described in her interactions with her advisor, to Mary's reported lack of self-confidence in her own scholarly ability and having to lean on her advisor for validation in the academic realm, evident in these women's stories was the recurring need for external validation to persist through their doctoral journeys. Half of the women who were interviewed described very poor experiences with mentorship and guidance during their doctoral guidance. The other half who described positive experiences in their programs still faced challenges that, if provided with some initial guidance or knowledge, could have potentially been avoided.

Sufficient mentorship to support individual identity development, that is known to be

crucial to the success of Black women in doctoral programs (Patton, 2009), and foundational learning surrounding post-secondary and post-graduate degree program preparation, has the potential to mitigate many of the barriers these Black women, as well as others, faced. There have been many scholars dedicated to facilitating safe spaces, mentorship, and community support, for Black women in higher education (Johnson, 2015; Pope & Edwards, 2016). But despite these efforts, there has been little systematic change within educational institutions that successfully combats this issue on a broader scale. The experiences of these women, while testimonies of resilience and overcoming adversity, can also be considered a cry for help. Black women have the right to fully access and meaningfully experience the higher education experience. Public education is not truly for the public if its practices intentionally isolate groups of people. It is apparent that there needs to be a collective shift toward simple validation of Black women's lived experiences in higher education, to deliberate and collective action toward establishing intersectional approaches and practices in these spaces to eradicate these systemic inequities.

Summary

In this chapter, the results from the inquiry into the lived experiences of eight AA female doctoral graduates were reported. The participants' demographics and background information were briefly highlighted. Utilizing Smith et al.'s (2022) protocol for data analysis, three group experiential themes emerged: (1) altruism, (2) feelings of inadequacy, and (3) role of advisor/committee member(s). Following their introductions, the themes that emerged from the data analysis were reported, along with addressing the research questions. The next chapter will provide a summary of the study and major findings, including a discussion of the results,

conclusions, implications, limitations and delimitations, suggestions for future research, and an overall summary.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to highlight the voices of Black women's experiences as they obtained their doctoral degree at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Ultimately, the aim was to uncover how African American women (AAW) with at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE) described their journey to conquer the hurdles impeding their graduation. The study hoped to shed light on how AAW believed they were able to graduate with a doctoral degree from a PWI. Through this research study, the researcher learned what graduating from a PWI signified to these women. This chapter includes a summary of the findings, discussion of the findings, implications of the study, delimitations and limitations, suggestions for future research, and a final summary.

Summary of Findings

Eight Black women who overcame their adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) enthusiastically volunteered to share their process to obtain a doctoral degree from a PWI. The findings through these women's personal stories reflected three dominant themes of altruism, feelings of inadequacy, and role of their advisor. Interviewing these women helped develop a foundation in understanding how their path to graduation was encouraged or obstructed. These women echoed many of my own experiences, wrought with roadblocks and a sense of instability. Placing a spotlight on their experiences and helping them feel both seen and heard was healing for me. Each of these Black women has pushed onward and upward despite the hardships they faced along with continued feelings of invisibility. Their resilience and persistence are resounding all throughout their stories.

In describing the significance of attaining a doctoral degree, the message of selflessness took the lead. These women were eager to support those that would come after them. They wanted to affect change in practices and protocols that would open up doors for women like them. Representation matters, and their stories reflected that. Their narratives carried hope for inspiring others to achieve what they did and to continue to motivate effective, lasting change for their communities. They recognized the immeasurable value in setting the stage for others and being an example of success.

The findings also shed light on how these women were made to feel less than. They questioned themselves, their integrity, and if they had the talent and resolve to make it to the other side to graduation. They even questioned if they were smart enough to belong in their respective doctoral programs. These experiences brought about a profound lack of belonging and lack of confidence in being able to progress. Many of these women struggled in silence. They feared speaking up would only bring more attention to their inadequacies, or they felt they did not have the support to share how they were truly feeling.

The last resounding theme highlighted the role of their advisor. Half the women had a negative influence or impact from their advisor, while the other half had a fulfilling and encouraging experience. There were some advisors that used derogatory terms to describe the clothing of their doctoral students, while there were other advisors that honed in on providing opportunities to help their doctoral students advance and feel championed. Amidst these two extremes, there were some women that had advisors that were completely absent; they did not feel any sense of support—positive, negative, or otherwise.

Overall, Black women have shifted the narrative of their ordeals by channeling all their energy into forging their own sense of purpose. Black women have utilized their grit and

determination to achieve their personal and professional objectives. In spite of a lack of resources, guidance, and mentorships, they found a way to overcome it.

Discussion

Dating back to the early 20th century, Black women who sought to pursue a higher education often encountered discrimination in the forms of racism, sexism, and other unique challenges that impacted their academic decision making and persistence toward their degrees. This was especially true for Black women in doctoral programs, and as such, they remain drastically underrepresented in academia, particularly at PWIs. Prior exposure to trauma also has the potential to compound these effects, as Black women are shown to have an increased risk of encountering negative outcomes as a result of these traumatic experiences. The purpose of this study was to explore the personal experiences of eight Black women who reported facing prior childhood trauma and recently obtained their doctoral degrees at PWIs. In particular, the researcher was interested in uncovering the ways in which each of these women successfully navigated perceived obstacles to persist through their programs and how they ultimately ascribed meaning to their experiences. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the women individually, asking open-ended questions about their experiences in their programs, their perceptions of what factors facilitated the completion of their degree, and factors that hindered their success. Findings revealed three major themes that emerged from their experiences: altruism, feelings of inadequacy, and the role of the advisor/committee member(s).

This study was implemented through the lens of Black feminist thought (BFT). This theory acknowledges that persistent racism in America and strong ties of race and racism established in White institutions must be considered when reflecting upon the feelings of isolation amongst African American (AA) female graduate students (Breines, 2006). BFT allows

an understanding that AAW have distinct experiences along with similarities that help to comprehend their journeys (Henry et al., 2010). The findings from this study, in fact, highlight this essential notion that despite similarities among the doctoral experiences of Black women, no two women's experiences are exactly the same.

The findings from this study were consistent with existing research examining the experiences of Black women getting their doctoral degrees, in that they often face myriad challenges in this endeavor (Simmons, 2016). Each of the women voiced selfless and seemingly altruistic reasons for pursuing their doctoral degrees, including a desire to uplift voices in the community, help minority students, solve classroom problems, and influence policy change. Two women also referenced God as a crucial component in the pursuit of their degree, suggesting a personal sense of religious obligation to serve others through their actions. Research has suggested that altruism, as well as spirituality, can function as a source of strength, hope, and motivation, which may counteract certain obstacles and barriers present in higher academic settings (Etter, 2019; McGee & Keller, 2007; Thoman et al., 2015). As such, it is possible that these variables functioned as motivators for these women, providing a sense of larger purpose in their lives, as they persisted toward their degrees.

When describing their doctoral journey, the women shared overwhelming feelings of inadequacy surrounding the initial process of deciding to pursue their degrees, as well as throughout their programs, often feeling out of place, unsure of themselves, and afraid to ask for help. Consistent with existing literature, this research also highlighted the role in which societal and institutional stereotypes play in perpetuating these negative feelings, by leading Black women to internalize inferiority (Shavers & Moore, 2014).

Each of the women also spoke to how the presence and support of their academic advisors and mentors either hindered or facilitated their degree completion. There were stark differences in how the women perceived these experiences, with those reporting more positive interactions with their mentor and advisors feeling grateful and satisfied with the level and type of support, and those with more negative experiences feeling alone and unsatisfied with the lack of support they so desired. Specifically, these women described their negative experiences with their advisors as “toxic,” “horrific,” and without guidance. These findings are further highlighted through BFT. This theory reminds that to inspire disparaged groups of the community, people must take into account women's oppressive situations, the impact of historically male-dominated areas, and the challenges that conventional perceptions of Black females present (Green et al., 2018). While there were women who found profound support through their advisor, there were also women that felt their advisor was impeding and minimizing their path to graduation.

Half of the women spoke of the trauma they experienced and endured while in their doctoral programs. These traumatic experiences were encountered at the hands of their dissertation advisors and committee members. As one participant stated, “My childhood trauma was a motivating factor and was nothing compared to the trauma I experienced in my freakin program.” Negative relationships with dissertation chairs can exacerbate challenges to dissertation completion. In one meta-analysis study examining doctoral student attrition across disciplines, doctoral students identified a problematic relationship with their dissertation chairperson as the most significant barrier to their completion of their degrees (Rigler et al., 2017). These resilient women not only overcame childhood trauma, but they also persevered and graduated with the highest degree possible in higher education.

These findings also aligned with the trauma and ACEs that students can face in higher education. Research has shown that minority students have an excessively higher number of ACEs once they enter higher education (Maguire-Jack et al., 2020). Minority students may confront intolerance, insensitivity, and systematic prejudice inside higher education institutions, leading to a feeling of helplessness and a lack of authentic voice (Richardson et al., 2018). This research on ACEs was directly represented in the narratives shared by some of the women. A few faced intolerances and a lack of support that contributed to feelings of negativity surrounding themselves and their graduation path.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

BFT is essential to understanding the doctoral program experiences of Black women at PWIs who report experiencing childhood trauma. The current study supported existing literature highlighting the challenges these women face, such as negative internalizations and isolation, which are rooted in institutional racism and structural oppression. Yet, all of the women in the study possessed a strong sense of altruism, which may have motivated them to succeed despite the challenges they faced. This sense of altruism was in some cases tied to religious beliefs, but nonetheless, was described as a source of strength and resilience.

BFT recognizes the critical importance of intersectionality in understanding the experiences of the Black women in the current study. This study highlighted the significance of considering the multiple layers of identity and the ways in which these intersect to shape individuals' experiences. This intersectionality also illuminated the need for tailored interventions, services, and support that address the unique challenges that Black women continually face in predominantly White academic environments.

General Implications

Two important observations were made regarding the sample participants' experiences. These were the disposition of their advisors and the timeline of their doctoral program. These women were desiring support from a quality advisor regardless of their race or gender. The sample participants expressed a need for an advisor that was communicative, affirming, engaging, and attentive and practices active listening skills. Having this type of support caused them to persist to doctoral completion. In addition, the timeline to degree completion was also a motivating factor for Brenda, who decided to complete her doctoral program after taking a break for over 4 years because of having experienced negative interactions with her advisor throughout her doctoral journey.

The role of the advisor, particularly for Black women, must be investigated thoroughly. An advisor is imperative to the success or the lack thereof for students. The women who had positive experiences with their advisor were uplifted. Those who described their experience as horrific struggled to complete their program in a timeline that could have been much more conducive to their success.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several practical implications for supporting Black women in doctoral programs at PWIs, including those who report experiencing prior trauma. It is imperative that institutions address systemic issues, such as institutional racism and structural oppression, that create barriers to these women pursuing and persisting in doctoral degree programs. Interventions and support services must be tailored to address the unique challenges faced by Black women with childhood trauma, including culturally responsive and trauma-informed mental health services, mentorship programs, and resources for accessing religious

communities and support. Furthermore, institutions must also recognize and support the sense of altruism that motivates many Black women to succeed in academic settings and provide opportunities for engagement that align with these values, such as community service and social justice initiatives.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

Delimitations are boundaries that have been set by the researcher for this study. Due to the silenced voices of AAW in the literature, the researcher intentionally chose this particular group for the study. A phenomenological study was conducted to herald the lived experiences of these women from their own account. The study included only AAW who graduated with their doctoral degrees from PWIs. The selection of participants excluded AAW obtaining their undergraduate and master's level degrees. The selection sample also excluded AAW who graduated with their doctoral degrees from historically Black college/universities (HBCUs).

Limitations

Limitations are shortcomings of the study that are out of the researcher's control. This study's limitations are sample size, race, gender, and the institutions attended by the participants. The sample was limited to AAW, with at least one ACE, who graduated with their doctoral degrees from a PWI. The insightful contributions made by these women were inspiring and uplifting; however, they are unable to be a voice for African American females and males that graduated from an HBCU. The small sample size afforded the researcher the opportunity to collect rich descriptive data. The eight women showcased in this study provided a glimpse into the educational experiences of AAs and should not be generalized as a unified voice for all AA female doctoral graduates' experiences at PWIs.

Recommendations for Future Research

The current study explored how eight Black women with prior trauma created meaning in their academic programs, as well as encountered and persisted when confronted with challenges. Considering these women highlighted altruistic and/or religious reasons for pursuing their programs, future research might explore the specific ways in which Black women, either with or without prior trauma, engage in activities throughout their degree programs that align with these areas, promote meaning, and sustain or strengthen their commitment to graduation. This study can be also replicated with Black women at HBCUs, along with Black women in undergraduate and graduate programs at any higher education institutions.

This study also revealed specific challenges relating to socialization and engagement during their programs, and as such, it would be important to continue the work of some scholars in investigating specific factors that positively contribute to sustaining Black women in advanced degree programs at PWIs and perhaps also the identification of which programs across the nation have successfully established these academic communities inclusive of these supportive variables.

This study further revealed the impact the role the advisor played in the participants' doctoral journeys. Researchers can utilize this type of study to explore the lived experiences of dissertation advisors/chairs that oversee Black women in doctoral programs as they persist to graduation.

The study also brought to light that each of the participants were first-generation college students. In order to create more equitable experiences for all students, every stakeholder must actively take part in doing so. Administration should provide first-generation college students with adequate financial and psychological support (including health insurance), giving them the

opportunity to focus on their academics. Another recommendation for institutions to implement would be effective mentoring programs between faculty and first-generation college students, keeping in mind that mentoring is not a cookie-cutter model. Mentoring relationships should be intentional and responsive.

This study reflected a qualitative perspective on the paucity of literature describing the lived experiences of AA females that graduated with their doctoral degrees from PWIs, having self-identified having at least one ACE. It appears that no research has been conducted quantitatively that examines these phenomena. There are opportunities for mixed-method researchers to explore and increase the overall understanding of this topic. Additionally, there is a need for greater insight into examining the role of trauma experienced by the participants while in their doctoral programs.

Summary

Black women have faced tremendous challenges throughout their journey of obtaining a doctoral degree. These women have overcome childhood trauma to reach their desired goal of obtaining the highest degree possible at a PWI. Adding to the body of literature are the voices of eight women describing their lived experiences of obtaining their doctoral degrees.

The results of this study suggested that Black females' childhood trauma was a motivating factor and a facilitator to pursue and graduate with their doctoral degree. Each of these women shared how they wanted to find ways to give back to their communities by being a representative to their students, being a voice for those they are serving in their communities, and partnering with those who choose to obtain a doctoral degree. Along with their childhood trauma being a motivating factor, the women spoke highly and humbly to their relationship and submission to God's will for their lives.

These women’s stories are uplifting, inspirational, and a source of encouragement. They vulnerably shared their lived experiences as Black women obtaining their doctoral degree at a PWI having experienced childhood trauma. Prayerfully, their heartfelt stories will serve as a glimpse of hope for those desiring to obtain their doctoral degree.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 5, 2022

Devara Brock
Todd Schultz

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY21-22-1031 Exploring the Meaning of Graduating with a Doctoral Degree from a Predominantly White Institution for African American Females with at least One Adverse Childhood Experience (ACEs)

Dear Devara Brock, Todd Schultz,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the following date: July 5, 2022. If you need to make changes to the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit a modification to the IRB. Modifications can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Letter of Informed Consent

Title of the Project: Exploring the Meaning of Doctoral Completion for African American Females who have Graduated from a Predominantly White Institution.

Principal Investigator: Devara Brock, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must African American, Female, Experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, doctoral graduate from a predominantly White institution. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore what it means to you to have graduated with a doctoral degree from a predominantly White institution, in spite of having an adverse childhood experience.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in online interviews that will be conducted using Zoom Video Conferencing and will be audio recorded. This will take 1 hour.
2. Review the transcript of your interview. This will take 1-2 hours.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms and interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then deleted. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study?

To participate in the research, you will need to pay for internet services.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Missouri. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study Devara Brock. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED] and/or email at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Todd Schultz at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You will be given a copy of this document for your records/you can print a copy of the

document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record/photograph me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix C: Semi-structured Interview Questions

Rapport Building Questions (These first questions are important to encourage your participant to speak freely throughout the interview).

1. If you could have two wishes just for yourself, what would they be?
2. Please tell me about yourself as if we were meeting for the very first time.

First Research Question

3. Please share with me your experiences of your educational journey as far back as you can recall.
4. Please share with me your reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree.
5. Please describe your graduation day.
6. What did graduating with a doctorate represent for you?
7. Describe how you felt being hooded on that day.
8. Describe how you felt walking across the stage.

Second Research Question

9. Please share your adverse childhood experiences you encountered throughout your educational journey.
10. Please share the obstacles you overcame while pursuing a doctoral degree.
11. What supports did you receive that encouraged you along the way?
12. Describe a time when you were determined to graduate no matter what.
13. Describe a time you felt like you gained or lost motivation to complete your doctoral degree.
14. Describe how you feel your adverse childhood experiences played a part in obtaining your doctoral degree.